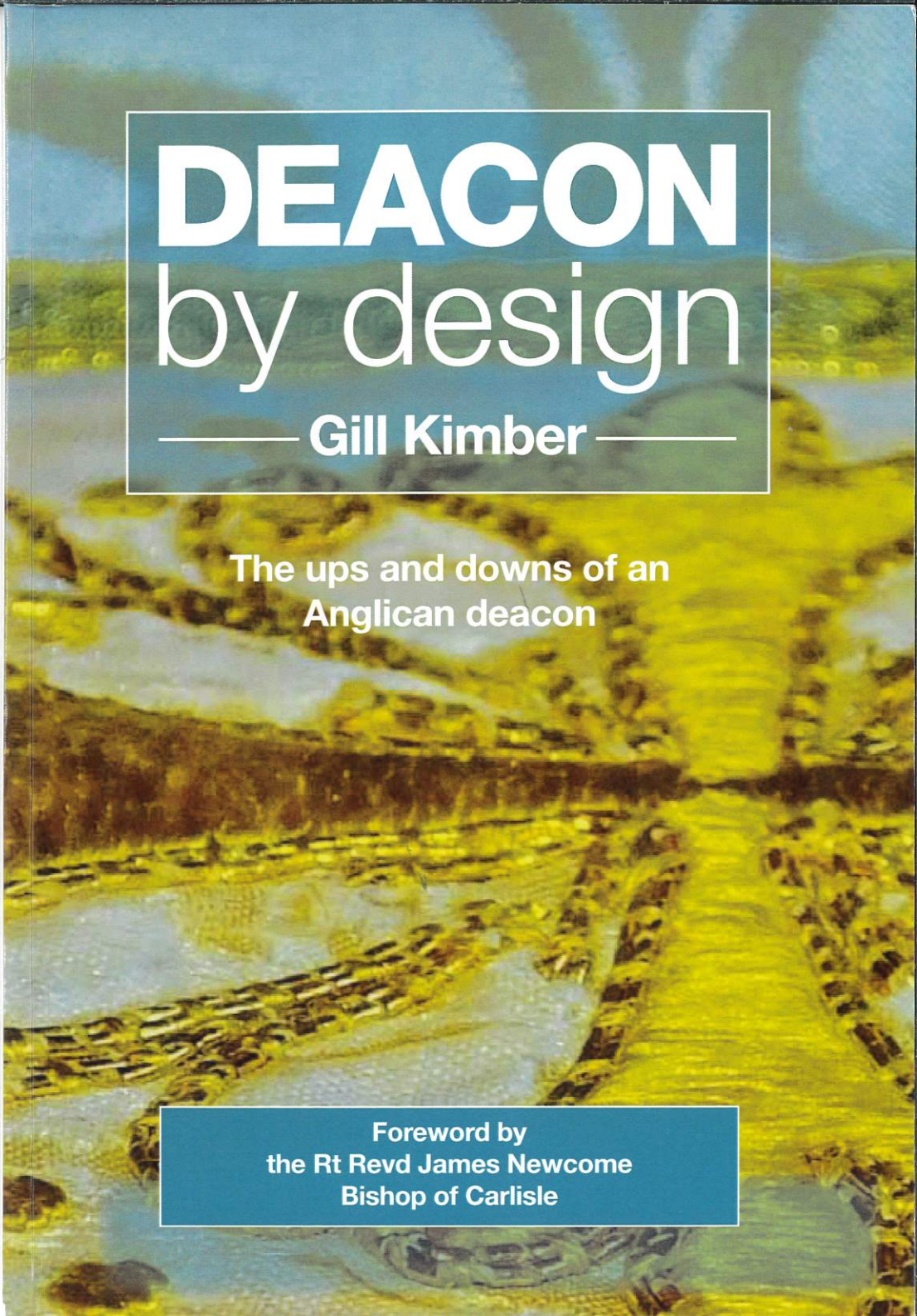
DEACON
by design
Gill Kimber
The ups and downs of an Anglican deacon
Foreword by
the Rt Revd James Newcome
Bishop of Carlisle

DEACON BY DESIGN

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The ups and downs of an Anglican deacon

Gill Kimber

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Published for Gill Kimber by
Verité CM Limited,124 Sea Place, Worthing, West Sussex BN12 4BG
+44 (0) 1903 241975

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Web: www.veritecm.com

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-910719-79-4

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All the events in this story are true. The author has recreated as accurately as possible events, locales and conversations from her memories. In order to maintain their anonymity in some instances some names of individuals and places have been changed.

Print Management by Verité CM Ltd

Printed in England

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the memory of my late father, the Revd Philip Bell,
without whose vision I would not be a deacon today,
to my husband Geoff, whose support never fails,
and to my fellow deacons, with whom I share the joy of our vocation.

A note about the cover picture

My father, his brother and my grandfather were all priests, and my grandmother used to make all their stoles, including designing and stitching the embroidery. When a stole was past its best, she would sometimes cut off the embroidery and attach it neatly to the new stole. I inherited one of my grandfather's stoles, now in a ragged state, and I am grateful to J&M Sewing Service Ltd (www.jandmsewing.com) for transferring my grandmother's embroidery design on to a new stole for me.

FOREWORD

by

the Rt Revd James Newcome, Bishop of Carlisle

Gill Kimber is a remarkable person, whose faith, perseverance and obedience shine through the pages of this equally remarkable book. The moving account of a vision granted to her high-church Anglican father leads into an authentic description of God's calling to diaconal ministry – and her own reluctance to respond; and that sets the very personal scene for an exploration of the so-called 'distinctive diaconate' through the eyes of someone who has struggled all the way with trying to understand what God has been saying in and through her own experience.

The result is an outstanding contribution to the development of an important category of ministry that has been neglected for far too long by the Church of England. Thanks to her – and a number of others – the distinctive (or 'permanent') diaconate is at last beginning to make a come-back in dioceses throughout this country, and its huge value for the mission of God's church is being increasingly recognised. Theology, tradition and reason all strongly support the case for its rediscovery, and Gill Kimber eagerly looks forward to the day when 'deacons will at last be able to take their rightful place, affirmed, respected and deployed as the third order of ordained ministry with the Church of England'.

But there is a challenge here to bishops like me. 'Unless,' she says, 'they are prepared to take up the cause of the diaconate and develop a national policy, deacons will continue to scrape along the bottom indefinitely at the mercy of a largely indifferent church.'

So I hope that this heartfelt and compelling story of one person's journey will act as a sign to policy makers as well as an encouragement to anyone who may be sensing that God is drawing them in this direction. Gill's book is an accessible and timely intervention which deserves a wide readership, and I will not be alone in being very grateful to her for writing it.

James Newcome
Bishop of Carlisle

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EXPLANATION

The Church of England believes in the three-fold order of ordained ministry of bishop, priest and deacon. However, despite General Synod reports, academic research and other publications on the diaconate, the ministry of the deacon is not well understood nor always well received. Most deacons work in isolation, often with the incomprehension and occasional hostility of both clergy and laity.

Yet we deacons believe that, just as the Holy Spirit called out the Seven in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, so he is still calling his deacons out today to stand on the margins of church and society, to be the voice for the voiceless and vulnerable, to reach out to those in need, and to create stepping stones to help people draw closer to God.

I use the word *deacon* to mean those who believe that God has called them to a lifelong ministry of being a deacon, and who are not called to become priests. We are often known as 'distinctive' deacons. Our vocation is different from those who are ordained deacon, with the expectation that, after a year or so, they will be priested: they are often known as 'transitional' deacons.

I share my story in the hope that it will bring more understanding, respect and affirmation for our vocation and that it will encourage those who are blessed with God's call to the ordained diaconate.

Gill Kimber

CHAPTER 1

THE VISION

It all started under a mango tree in the city of Jos in northern Nigeria. September 1983, and my husband Geoff had just picked up our blue airletters from mission headquarters and brought them home. There was one in my father's handwriting, but addressed only to me.

Odd. Usually it was my mother who wrote, and always to 'Dear Gilly and Geoff'. Why was my father writing only to me?

It wasn't the usual aerogramme, folded over and stuck down round the edges. It was a single sheet of thin blue paper in a similar envelope.

Geoff went back to work and our fourth child, our son who was eight months old, was grizzling. He did a lot of that. I put Robin in his baby chair and carried both him and the letter outside our bungalow. I hoped if I put him under the mango tree, he would be distracted by the movement of the leaves in the wind, giving me some peace to read. I sat down on the concrete cover to the cess pit, and ripped open the envelope.

'My dear Gilly,' began my father's familiar writing. *'I want to try and describe to you an experience which I had at the Clergy Summer School in Weymouth.'*

Dad was an Anglican clergyman with two parishes in Bournemouth. At the conference he was one of about 350 clergy who had met for a week in the theatre of the Teacher Training College. He described the way the chairs were set out and how Communion had been arranged.

Strange. It was normal for my meticulous father to pay attention to detail – but this was over the top even for him. I read on, more and more intrigued.

The final Eucharist began at 12.15. The time for the Offertory came and everyone was singing a hymn which was new to him: 'O what a gift, what a wonderful gift, who can tell the wonder of the Lord?'[1]

I have his letter in front of me now as I type, and this is what he says next:

> *Halfway through this I clearly saw you and I together in a room in Nigeria. We were kneeling on the floor, facing each other and weeping copiously and freely. We wept with complete understanding, with no inhibitions, and in the context of a strong awareness of love for Christ and in Him for each other. We wept for deep sorrow at the separation from each other and the sacrifices and hardships which you had endured over the years. We knew that the trials for which we wept were right and good because they were the ones to which God had called you. We wept in the peace of heart of knowing that God's will had been done in this, and that 'His will is our peace'.*

His words stabbed me. How could Dad know how much I had struggled during the eight years we had been in Nigeria? I had never told my parents – I hadn't wanted to worry them. It was an extraordinary insight. That God knew and understood, that it had all been right, and that obedience to him had been noted and loved by him, washed over me in waves that began to heal some of the wounds I knew were there, but which I had discounted, because that's just what happens in missionary work.

1 'Canticle of the Gift' by Pat Uhl. Copyright, 1967, 1992 American Catholic Press, 16565 State St., South Holland IL 60473, USA. Reprinted with permission.

Then Dad continues:

Needless to say, I was quite overwhelmed by this and could not sing any more of the hymn, though the words spoke to me and through me.

'Now look around you and open your eyes: remember the Spirit is here. Here within his church, his people are one. Look the Lord is near; Christ our Lord and our King.'

The service continued; I received Communion; we came to the final hymn 'Lord of all power, I give you my will . . .'

Then the scene changed and you and Geoffrey and I were all in England and all three of us in a room together. Again there were tears, but this time it was purely tears of joy and fulfilment! For Geoffrey had been ordained and you were a deaconess! We all three felt as if a culmination had been reached, a plan completed, a desire fulfilled, a deep satisfaction experienced, and a family ministry available to the Lord in this form. I don't mean that I saw it as we three working in the same place, necessarily, but all three of us felt we had found our final vocations in this life and rejoiced to be at one in them.

The hymn came to a close: 'Lord of all being, I give you my all; If e'er I disown you I stumble and fall; But sworn in glad service your word to obey, I walk in your freedom to the end of the way.'

I stopped reading the letter again, looking up at the tree without seeing it, our concrete bungalow with its pan roof that was our home, the huge boulder outside the children's bedroom window covered with morning glory, the massive rocks piled up behind the house which towered over our compound.

I didn't know what to think.

Then Dad adds:

> *Well, Gilly dear, I have only outlined what I experienced. I do not attempt an explanation or an interpretation. You know that I am not an emotional person, but these two experiences certainly affected me deeply, and I had to go to my room and have a good face-wash before I could go to lunch in the dining hall!*

I sat on, the letter in one hand, absently rocking the baby chair with the other. I began to re-read it, picking out some of the details, thinking them through. I imagined him there sitting in his seat with all the other clergy, following the service, loving the hymns even though he was tone-deaf. And then apparently poleaxed by an experience he doesn't even call a vision. He simply says, 'I clearly saw . . .'

Robin was grizzling again and hungry. I picked him up in his chair and went back into the house, setting the letter on the table while I fed him. Then I put him in his cot for what I hoped would be a sleep, although he didn't seem to need much. I couldn't wait for Geoff to come home.

There was no chance of discussion for some hours. Our three daughters returned from school. People turned up at the door, needing attention: none of us missionaries had a phone and everything was done by visiting. Then it was supper time when the electricity failed as it did with monotonous regularity, and it was Geoff's job as the person living nearest the generator shed to grab a torch and go out to start it up. It powered one light for each house on the compound, and the rest of the time we had Tilley lamps, bush lanterns and candles at hand.

The children had a bath and scampered in their nighties down the concrete corridor to their bedrooms. We prayed with them all and left them sitting up in bed as they did every night, reading and playing for a

while by the light of the bush lamp hanging from a hook in their ceiling.

I went through to the lounge with Robin to give him his final feed, and said to Geoff, 'Sit down – you need to hear this.' And I read the letter to him.

He stared at me. Like me, he couldn't begin to understand it. We were working with the Sudan United Mission, an interdenominational society which had been founded by Karl Kumm ninety years previously. A rapidly-growing indigenous church, the Church of Christ in Nigeria (COCIN), had developed from the mission's work, and we had joined the mission in 1975, at a most exciting time, when the English and Australian missionaries were handing over all responsibilities to Nigerian church leaders. We were developing TEE or Theological Education by Extension, a brilliant way of taking Christian teaching to church leaders and members so that they could study and grow in their faith at home. We had been absorbed in this for eight years, and during all that time it had never occurred to us to wonder about the denominational background of our colleagues. It just didn't matter. We all worshipped with COCIN. We spoke, taught, preached in and used Hausa, the trade language common to northern Nigeria and the Plateau tribes.

What's more, Geoff was a Baptist. He grew up as part of a Strict and Particular Baptist church, but had moved away from what he saw as some of its more extreme positions once he had left home. I sat lightly to my Anglicanism; we were both members of Salters' Hall Baptist Church in inner London where we had lived when we were first married, and who continued to support us.

To top it all, we were lay people. It had never occurred to Geoff to think about going into ordained ministry. He was a lay pastor on the Nigerian team at the big headquarters church, but ordination? No.

And I wanted to keep it that way. I was a clergy daughter and had always been very clear about one thing: I would never marry a clergyman.

I had come to dislike the circumstances in which I had spent my teenage years in a picture-postcard Hampshire parish. I hated always being on show. I hated the ways we were expected to behave. I hated having to please everyone and the way my mother was always worrying about what people thought, about how we must go to three services every Sunday. It felt like a straitjacket.

None of what Dad had written made any sense to either of us. On the other hand, we both had a profound respect for him. He was a deeply spiritual person who influenced us both, just by being a man who always trusted God in deed as well as word. He was also very rational. He believed that the Christian faith was reasonable, and he loved teaching it with exceptional clarity and simplicity.

It was true that he was not an emotional person. He rarely showed his feelings. He was very calm and in all my life I never saw him in much of a flap. He was a high churchman who had trained at the College of the Resurrection in Mirfield, as had my grandfather. He still held to that monastic discipline of time, working long hours. It was momentous for him to write such a letter, to describe the effect it had had on him, actually to say what he felt.

Geoff and I talked it over. We went to God in prayer and said, 'We don't get this, Lord. At all. Not even slightly', and came to a conclusion.

Maybe Dad was seeing us as ordained into the Anglican Church, because to him, being an ordained priest was the highest and best way he knew of serving God. He never stopped feeling privileged to be a priest, and celebrating the Eucharist for him was the height of all blessings. Maybe he was seeing something about our future – a future when the two of us would continue to work together in ministry – but he was seeing it through the lens of his own vocation and experience. It was the only explanation that made any sense to us.

So I wrote back to Dad, thanking him for his letter, and saying we were taking it very seriously and were praying about it, but as yet –

honestly – we couldn't understand it.

I later realised just how important was his phrase 'I do not attempt an explanation or an interpretation'. He never at any point put any pressure on us. I knew that he would pray for us, and leave it in God's hands, and wait to see what might happen.

We went back to the TEE work we loved. Over the next year Robin began to walk. The girls kept growing. Our eldest, Hannah, turned eleven, and we realised we had to do some serious thinking about the future.

Should we stay in Nigeria? We were on the point of handing over our work to a Nigerian leader, the Revd Dan Pochi, a man of education and faith. This had always been our intention. We still believe that missionaries are like scaffolding: we are there when something is being built, but when it's strong, you take away the scaffolding and it stands on its own. An indigenous church needs indigenous leaders, and we were blessed with Dan Pochi.

So if our TEE work was coming to a positive end, what would we do instead? We talked to the mission and the church leaders, and nothing was clear. The church wanted us to stay and develop the English aspect of TEE, but we did not think this would be fair to Dan Pochi who was highly competent.

And what about secondary education? The children attended an excellent American-run inter-mission school attended by many different nationalities. They were doing well and were happy, but we did have reservations. The only option for teenagers was to take the Baccalaureate, which was rare in England then. If we kept them at Hillcrest School, they would be at a disadvantage when we finally returned to England.

In June 1984 we were back in the UK for leave with our future still foggy. We had packed up our possessions in Nigeria as we always did when we went home for six months. This time we had divided them in two: some 'to give away' and others to be sent on to us, in the event of our not returning. But we still had no idea what lay ahead of us.

CHAPTER 2

FIGHTING GOD

Most missionaries would say that going back home for leave is a mixed blessing. It's wonderful to see family and friends again. It can be inspirational, visiting supporting groups and churches. It's important that the children are reacquainted with their grandparents and relatives.

On the other hand, our own country changes so much in the three years or so while we are away. We no longer know what the current issues are and how the culture has developed. Often missionaries have no home of their own. We can be entirely dependent on others to help us find accommodation for the duration of a few months. Some don't even achieve this, simply moving around and staying with family and friends. Travelling becomes the norm, speaking to supporters all over the UK. It can be a relief to get back to a house overseas that we call 'home', where we can settle down again and where everything is more familiar to us than our own country. We did not know it then, but all that was about to change for us.

When we arrived at Heathrow my parents, Philip and Dilys Bell, met us at the airport and took us home with them. They had moved from Bournemouth and my father was now parish priest in the villages of Hilperton, Staverton and Whaddon in Wiltshire. We stayed with them in their vicarage for a while, then a church member said she had a large house with an annexe which was temporarily free, and would we like it?

Looking back I never heard my parents say that having six people to stay was a burden, but now I realise just how much they did for us.

One of our supporting churches had previously offered to find us somewhere to live in Weymouth. It would have been an excellent place for us, not too far from my parents with good schools for the children. We contacted the church but heard nothing, and so we left it, not liking to appear pushy. When our situation grew urgent I got in touch with the vicar once more, and I still remember his voice on the phone. 'I'm so sorry, Gill, but we haven't been able to find anything for you. What we had in mind has fallen through. We very much want to help but it hasn't worked out.' It was hard to hear and harder to believe.

Then the church family needed their annexe back and again we were homeless. During our previous leave we had stayed in a large house belonging to a naval officer and his wife, a few miles from my parents.

I phoned them. I didn't suppose there was any chance . . . ?

'How extraordinary,' said Sue's voice. 'We are being posted overseas soon for two years and we've been desperately trying to find tenants. We thought we had some but they have just fallen through. Would you like to come over for coffee and talk about it?'

So it was settled. They were happy to have tenants and we were happy to have a place we knew to be free for the foreseeable future – but two years? There was no way we would need it for that long. So we thought.

As the months and the deputation meetings went by, Geoff and I became increasingly clear that it would not be right for us to return to Nigeria. We realised that we had done what God had wanted us to do. We had developed TEE in Borno State in northern Nigeria, opening Bible classes in police and army barracks as well as in churches all over the state. That work was in the Hausa language, often with people who were barely literate. In leading them through guided study, TEE classes

improved their level of education as well as teaching them the basics of the Christian faith. Much of our ministry was with Nigerian pastors and evangelists, for whom we came to have an enormous respect and admiration, who coped with far harsher circumstances than we did.

Then the General Council of the Church of Christ in Nigeria (now known as the Church of Christ in Nations) had asked us to move to Plateau State and start TEE classes in English for more educated people. The church was growing so fast that it was not possible to keep up with providing theologically trained leaders through the traditional means of sending them for residential study at district and regional Bible schools. Numbers were increasing most quickly in the cities, and TEE provided decentralised courses that fed spiritually hungry people and taught those with leadership qualities.

It was the most rewarding work we have ever been given to do, but we realised it was time to give it up. The church had developed a strong indigenous leadership with men of wisdom and maturity who were able to give their people far more than we could. To go back to Nigeria, to start something else, would be to send a message that we thought they couldn't do without us. That would be to build our own personal kingdom, to pander to our own egos. God takes a dim view of egotism.

In December 1984 deputation responsibilities came to an end. Prayerfully and with much thought, we started the process of leaving the mission to which we had belonged for ten years. We had gone out in February of 1975 with Hannah, a toddler of eighteen months. We resigned in December 1984, with four children. Caris had been born in 1976 in Vom hospital in Plateau State. Juliet arrived in 1978 while we were on our first leave. Robin was born in Jos, also in Plateau State, in 1983. He was now the same age as Hannah had been when we first went to Nigeria.

We sent for our possessions. We settled into the Wiltshire house,

put the children into local schools, and Geoff began searching for a job.

God had provided so much for us, but we were about to go through one of the most testing times of our lives. At first Geoff found work very quickly. He had originally trained as a teacher of English as a Foreign Language, and there was a language school in the next village which employed him. The contracts were only monthly, and then two-weekly, depending on how many students the school could attract. After six months we booked a free holiday in Cornwall through friends of my parents. The day before we were due to travel, the phone rang. It was the language college.

'We've got a week's work for you next week. Can you do it?'

Geoff, mindful that he had six mouths to feed, said, 'If you can make it six weeks, then I'll cancel my holiday.'

'Sorry. We can only offer you one week.'

We went to Cornwall, and when we returned there was no more work. Eventually the college closed.

In any case, we were clear that we didn't want to stay in secular work. Mindful of Dad's vision, we set about praying and looking for the sort of work God might want us to do in the long term. Ordination was still far from our thoughts. Geoff badly wanted to stay in TEE, and was given a three-month contract by a Christian organisation to do some research for them in developing distance-learning in the UK. But by Christmas 1985, he was unemployed again.

We cast the net wider. We took Christian publications and trawled through the adverts. He applied for everything that looked remotely interesting or relevant. He contacted Oak Hill theological college, where one of the lecturers was exploring distance-learning as an aspect of ordination training. For a time this brought in a lot of writing, including some articles for the Lion handbook *The Message of the Bible*, edited by George Carey before he was Archbishop. Then that ended too.

None of these efforts led anywhere. We prayed with an increasing sense of desperation, unable to fathom what was going on, facing unemployment again and again. One day we were talking to some church friends where the husband Peter was a successful businessman.

'I can give you some work, Geoff,' he offered. 'It will be manual labour – how do you feel about that?'

'Anything,' was Geoff's response. So in January 1986 he began work laying a gas main in Salisbury with one of Peter's staff, which included spending time on the flat roof of Lloyds bank in the bitter winter of that year. It was so cold that a block of ice in front of our house did not thaw for a month. The old house was beautiful and roomy, but we began to discover some of its disadvantages.

One of the internal walls had been removed and replaced with a curtain, and this open-plan arrangement made it impossible to pay for the oil needed for the central heating to keep the place adequately warm. My parents gave us a moveable gas stove which we pushed into whatever room we were using. One day some friends visited us from a Baptist church in Bishops Stortford that had supported us when we were in Nigeria. I gave them lunch in the draughty dining room with the stove at full pelt. A few days later we received a note from them.

'We told our house group about you,' wrote Brian and Grace. 'We had a whip round. Please use the enclosed to turn on the heating more often!' I was sorry they had been so cold, but that cheque was more than welcome. Such generosity and practical kindness meant more than words can say.

When the gas main installation finished, Peter told us, almost tearfully, that he was very sorry but he had no more work he could offer. This time nothing came along, and unemployment was inevitable. I applied for benefits which my husband loathed. He felt miserable and guilty that he could not provide for his family, but my attitude was that

we were doing our best and we needed some help along the way. Family credit was necessary and helpful and I wasn't going to turn it down. I'm blessed with a worry-less attitude to money. I had grown up in a clergy house in the days when vicars were not paid their work expenses. Money had been very tight throughout my childhood, treats were scarce, new clothes weren't always possible and I remember getting a trunk of garments for our family from the Poor Clergy Corporation charity. So I expected little, and was good at making it go a long way. We had clothes on our backs, food on the table and a roof over our heads. I worried about other things, but not about that.

It was just as well because life was about to take a turn for the worse as far as I was concerned. We were regularly attending a parish church nearby where people were very friendly and the lively priest pastorally warm. He took an interest in us and we confided to him that we were having a very challenging time finding permanent work.

'You need to put an end to this,' he told us bluntly. 'You need to get ordained, Geoff.'

Oh no no no, we both said. That's not for us.

But we couldn't get away from it. Person after person in the church said the same thing. We thought they were just saying it, because they couldn't imagine missionaries having any other sort of ministry. So their opinions slid off us.

We soldiered on with one job application after another, until we had a file of seventy. Geoff reached final interviews, but time and again either someone else was appointed or nobody at all. It was baffling. However, in the autumn of 1986 he had three applications on the go, with final interviews slated for each, as a lay worker in different churches elsewhere in the country. As part of this search, he went one day to see the Archdeacon of Bath and Wells about the Anglican route into lay ministry.

John Burgess listened carefully, but he did not mince his words.

'You need to put an end to this search,' he said in words that made us realise he had talked with our vicar. 'I think you should apply to explore ordination.'

'No,' Geoff persisted. 'It wouldn't be good for our family; I have no wish for it myself, and I see myself in lay ministry. In any case, I have a number of irons in the fire at present.'

John didn't press the point.

'OK, see where that goes. If it doesn't amount to anything, come back and see me after Christmas.'

We were confident that Geoff was well-positioned for any of the jobs as he had reached final interview for all three. Ordination was still not part of our thinking, and we were not impressed with a local doctor's opinion who was also a lay reader in the church.

'You need to be ordained and not lay,' he told us. 'The Church of England is like an army. It has officers and it has foot soldiers. If you want to get anywhere in the church, if you want to have any freedom and security for your family, you need to seriously consider joining the officer class and becoming a priest.'

Who wanted to be part of a church with such hierarchical thinking? we said to each other. Weren't we all equal in God's eyes? Didn't Jesus say that anyone who wanted to lead must be the servant of all? In any case, what was so special about ordination? We had spent ten years in fruitful ministry as lay people. Surely it was possible to do that in our own country.

No, ordination wasn't for us. In all this time I wasn't idle myself, with four children to look after and all the paperwork that came with the job applications. Geoff was a competent administrator but I had been trained as one and I liked filling in forms, which he detested. I was also trying to make a go of my own writing. In Nigeria I had spent some years

as the field editor of our mission magazine, commissioning material, organising photographs, recording, translating and writing up interviews. I had also written fiction for adults and children, and one of my short stories had been broadcast on the BBC World Service. I approached Christian publications, had a couple of articles accepted, and for a while wrote a regular column for the *Christian Herald.* The Sudan Interior Mission expressed an interest in my Africa-based children's stories, offering publication and even talking about making short illustrated films of the stories. I got in touch with IVP who expressed much interest in my adult short stories, and I began to meet with an editor there. I have always loved writing, and reading, and words, and this was what I wanted most to do.

But I had exactly the same experience as Geoff. Time and again promising outlooks clouded over and went dark. SIM dropped the project. The IVP readers wanted me to create a novel rather than write short stories and I couldn't see how to do it.

It was hard spiritually, too. I had bad patches where I was angry with God and blamed him. I asked him how he could do this to us, when we had spent ten years in difficult circumstances serving him as faithfully as we knew how. It felt like he had abandoned us.

I knew that couldn't be true, but why were we being left in this limbo, with children to feed, and with hearts willing to do whatever God gave us – or so we thought? Geoff felt he had been thrown on the scrapheap. The not knowing, and the waiting, was endless, miserable, pointless and utterly frustrating. It was like driving through thick fog, not even able to see the verges of the road, never mind the way ahead.

Then one day my younger brother Chris said something to me that I have never forgotten. 'God has only promised to be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path, Gilly,' he said gently. 'He doesn't always give us daylight to see the horizon.'

So I tried to concentrate on the next thing, and not to think too much about the future. It wasn't easy, but Chris' words were like the thread Ariadne unrolled in the Minotaur's labyrinth for Theseus to follow. He had no idea of the way. He had to trust the thread, and we had to trust God.

By the end of the year, Geoff had been for all three interviews. One, he was told, was very close and there was division over whether the job should go to him or the other interviewee. He wasn't chosen. Another job, developing TEE with a different theological college and therefore very relevant to his experience, turned out to be already promised to a missionary in India who was coming home specially. After the third, one of the interviewing panel actually wrote to him, apologising that they had not appointed him and noting that he felt sorry for Geoff, desperate as he was for a job. They had decided to withdraw the advert and rethink the job description.

We were both thoroughly miserable.

CHAPTER 3

GOD'S MYSTERIOUS WAYS

I began one of the biggest struggles of my life. I was passionately against my husband going into the ministry. I was stubbornly determined that my children would not have the same clergy upbringing as me. I was sick with worry about the effect that the whole process would have on them.

We'd already uprooted them once from everything they knew as home in Nigeria. Although they seemed to be adapting well, I did not want to overload them. I was profoundly anxious about what would happen if we moved them again when Geoff went to theological college, where they would once more have to adapt to new schools. Then another uprooting, this time to his curacy. Although we wondered whether Geoff would only be required to do one curacy because he was in his forties and an experienced minister, this was not a given and I could not bear to think about the effect of a further move.

That was before we were free to select a parish, move again, and finally have the opportunity to settle down for a while. My heart thudded with fear every time I thought about it, and although I prayed constantly I knew that my fears were not of the unknown, as many fears are. They arose out of my very real experience.

'You don't realise what parish life is like,' I said to Geoff angrily one day. 'If you go into ministry your life will not be your own. You will belong to the church and parish. People will ring you whenever they wish, day or night. Meals will be constantly interrupted. If you want a break, you'll

always have to leave the house, because it's public property. Privacy is difficult with parishioners coming and going. The children will be expected to behave in certain ways. I'm not having it.'

Geoff listened, and thought, and prayed, and said very little. I wanted him to argue with me, but he didn't. He just waited, and I knew instinctively that this was perilous for me. It meant he was expecting God to do something, although he didn't know what, and that added to my sense of fear and misery. I became more and more depressed and tearful, feeling forced down a path to a life of bondage I dreaded.

During this time, and understanding a little of my struggle, my parents offered to have the children for the weekend so that the two of us could go on retreat to St Denys's House in Warminster. We met the small community of nuns, were given a simple but comfortable bedroom and shared the nuns' meals. I managed polite conversation and fixed smiles. On the Saturday evening my ebullient husband invited Sister Stephanie to come and have a chat in our room. They were both missionary teachers with a great deal in common, and I sat on my bed and just listened. Not being a teacher myself I didn't have much to say, and in any case I had begun to feel that everything was happening on the other side of an invisible screen.

The next day, Sunday, we went to early morning worship and then to coffee in the retreat house. In the entrance hall, I started looking through leaflets in a desultory way. There didn't seem to be anything else to do. Sister Stephanie was there, talking to another nun, and she introduced me. Suddenly, she put her arms around me.

'I'm so sorry,' she said warmly. 'You're finding all this so difficult, my dear, aren't you.' It was a statement, not a question.

I emerged from her embrace, amazed. Neither of us had said anything all weekend about my state of mind. So how did she know? It was my first indication that God knew my heart, and did not blame me

for it. That one sentence of hers did not solve my dilemma, but it was a patch of comfort, of sunlight in a bleak landscape of fear.

Then something happened which at the time seemed to have no relevance to my dilemma. The vicar in our church decided to set up house groups for the first time, and he came to see us and asked Geoff to lead one of them. He then turned to me and said he would be grateful if I could look after a woman who had recently become a Christian and who, he felt, needed some support. I agreed, and as Maria and I attended the same house group, it was easy to pick her up in our car as I had to go past her front door anyway.

She asked deep questions and was reassessing her whole outlook on life. When I took her home after the group, I would often turn off the engine and we would talk. Even in winter we sat in the dark and the cold parked on the road outside her drive, discussing God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, prayer, behaviour, families and experiences. It was amazing and humbling to spend time with someone so spiritually hungry.

A couple of other women in the church approached me and asked if I would be interested in forming a prayer group. It was 1985 and many churches were influenced by John Wimber and his Vineyard movement. His visits to the UK were packed out and supernatural experiences were the norm. I had come across this when I was in Nigeria and had read as much as possible about the movement and the spirituality and theology behind it. We four women wanted to discover more for ourselves.

We began meeting in our house for discussion and for learning how to pray in the Spirit. It was a time of gentle growth for us, and all was going well until Maria decided to attend a charismatic meeting in Bath.

When I saw her the Sunday afterwards, I could see she was in a terrible state. Normally chic and pretty, she looked almost bedraggled. She was shaking, tearful, and clearly seriously frightened. Could we meet?

I called the group together, and Maria told us what had happened. She had gone to the meeting and had enjoyed it, and afterwards there was a time for prayer and laying on of hands, as usual. A man had come to pray with her, and she had begun to tremble and weep. He told her that she was possessed by a devil, and now she was terrified.

Shocked and anxious, we knelt with her on the floor in our sitting room. We laid hands on her and prayed with her in the name of Jesus, and the other women prayed in tongues. I kept my eyes open and was watching Maria as I had learnt to do, and I saw her face begin to change. It distorted, and she twisted and struggled as we continued to pray. None of us really knew what to do. We carried on praying in the name of Jesus until finally she quietened down.

I was very shaken. The next day we contacted a minister in Bath who was an adviser to the bishop on deliverance ministry. He came to see us with a member of his team who was a psychiatrist; we talked it all through with them and I drew strength and courage from their calm approach. They confirmed what I had begun to think, that this was certainly not a case of demonic possession. Clearly something profound was happening to Maria, but it was not that. There were none of the hallmarks of possession. However, they thought there was a possibility that she was being oppressed, rather than possessed, by some evil influence, although none of us had any idea what it might be.

It was helpful to discuss it all and pray with them, but I was still puzzled as to the nature of her experience, and I did not know how best to help her. I continued to pray, and the next night, as I did so, a picture came into my mind. I saw small black figures, oriental in appearance, sitting cross-legged, their eyes closed, next to a pagoda. I had begun to have mental pictures sometimes when I prayed, and I usually ignored them, assuming that I was overtired, or stressed, or both, and the best thing to do was to say Amen and go to sleep.

Two days later Maria rang me. Her voice told me straightaway that she was entirely different. She was bubbling with excitement and wanted to pick me up and take me to the golf course to walk her dog.

I won't forget that morning, a cold autumn day with the yellow leaves coming off the trees, the dog let off the lead and us in our warm coats and gloves as we trod the grassy path around the links and bunkers.

'Has it happened to you?' she demanded as soon as we met.

'Has what happened to me?' I was mystified.

'It happened when I was praying! I suddenly heard these strange words coming out of my mouth. God's given me the gift of tongues!'

Gone were the anxiety, the tears, the fear and the strange behaviour of earlier that week. She seemed liberated, radiant. We hugged and prayed together, and eventually I said, 'It doesn't matter now, but do you by any chance have any connection with a Buddhist country?'

'Well how funny you should say that,' she responded and put her hand into her coat pocket. 'Only this morning I got a letter from my sister, who's in Thailand.'

I concealed my shock. So I'd seen something true in advance during my prayer time – the oriental faces, the pagoda. My only problem was that I had no idea what to do with this information. I was very reluctant to talk it through with Maria, as the last thing I wanted was to frighten her again; yet the spiritual information clearly was relevant to her. I had to say something.

She wanted to know about our meeting with the diocesan deliverance minister, as I had asked her permission to bring him in. When I told her what had been said she did not seem surprised: she had moved on so far since I last saw her that there was little need to explain any further. Then I introduced the possibility of oppression, and she listened intently.

'Do you think God is saying that my relationship with my sister, who's into Eastern religions, might have some kind of negative influence

on my spiritual life?'

'It's possible,' I said cautiously. 'Can you think of anything that might be relevant?'

She searched her memory. 'My sister did ask me to take part in a temple ritual once,' she said. 'And I did.'

'That might just unlock the mystery,' I pondered. 'In any case, it doesn't matter now, because Jesus has so clearly healed you. But I do think it's a sign never to be involved in such matters again.' Then we hugged and I went home, relieved that she was free, confused about what was happening, and even a little envious. I had often prayed for the ability to talk to God without having to think of the words. I'd read a lot about the work of the Holy Spirit in people's lives, his gifts and his graces, and I wanted to love Jesus more and better and thought praying like that would help. Happy for her, wistful for myself, I got lunch ready.

Not long afterwards Maria asked me to go with her to the meeting where she had had the bad experience that started us on this road. After the talk a man came up to her. She tried to introduce me, and I knew instantly who he must be. Turning away from me, taking her hand, looking deep into her eyes, drawing her towards himself as he did so, his body language in that moment told me everything I needed to know. Here was somebody who enjoyed having spiritual power over the vulnerable and ignorant. He was bad news.

As we drove home it became clear that she had begun to see it for herself. Developing spiritual discernment can be lengthy and complicated, but God was giving her the wisdom she needed. I heaved a sigh of relief and stopped fretting over her.

In any case something momentous had happened to me. Towards the end of that demanding week, as we were getting ready for bed, Geoff looked at me across the room and said, 'What's happened to you? You're different.'

I paused. I hadn't wanted to say it, in case it wasn't true, but now I had to face myself.

'I know. I feel different. At the end of all that's happened with Maria, I feel the most extraordinary sense of being wrapped round and round in God's peace, like a cocoon. I'm not worried any more. I'm not worried about you going into the ministry. I've even stopped worrying about the children. I can't explain it, because I know the situation will be hard and difficult. But for some reason I don't understand, I feel completely at peace.'

After Christmas, in January 1986, Geoff went back to the archdeacon.

CHAPTER 4

NOW IT'S YOUR TURN

How could we have been so completely boneheaded? God had told us plainly in Nigeria the way he wanted us to go. It had made no sense to us and we had chosen to look everywhere but there. We had put ourselves through a great deal of trouble which might not have been necessary if we had had more obedient hearts.

Was that it? Should we feel guilty, reproached by God for our blindness? Should I have blamed myself for my own pain, the fear and anxiety that had acted like spurs in the sides of a horse forced to go somewhere it greatly feared? Should I have had more faith, more ability to commit the future of our children to God's kindness?

I hadn't had that faith, but somehow, I don't think God blamed us for our struggles. He surely knew how we would react, and why. He knew our ignorance, our weakness and my fear. He was ahead of our game, and brought experiences and people together in our lives to convince us finally of the way ahead. Door after door had shut, and when we finally and reluctantly started walking towards this one, everything began to open. One thing was for sure: we had certainly sat down and counted the cost, at length and in detail. In the future, whenever things became difficult and frustrating – as they did – we could return again and again to this one solid foundational truth: that God had called us, and would not accept no for an answer, and that was why we were doing what we did. Doubt was forever behind us.

Once the ordination ball started rolling, it moved at speed. Geoff went to national selection in the spring of 1986 and was recommended, despite the factors in his situation that normally put off vocations advisers: that he was unemployed, and was in his forties with four children. We set about trying to find a theological training college that still had space and could take him at such short notice.

Our hope was for a place at Trinity College in Bristol. This would mean that we could stay in the same area, keep in touch with my parents and provide some continuity for the children. Sadly for us, Trinity was full, and the only other college with free places was St John's in Nottingham.

Talk about last-minute. The owners of the house where we were staying contacted us to say that their two-year tour was complete and they were coming home at the end of June and would need the house. My mother had the children on the day that Geoff and I scrubbed the place from top to bottom and opened all the external doors to dry the newly washed carpets. We packed and were able to leave some of our stuff with our parents until we found out what sort of accommodation we would have.

And there lay the next hurdle. We had nowhere to go. St John's could not take us as all their accommodation would be in use until the end of term. We decided to have a free family holiday in Newquay again. At least, we reasoned, we would have the house there to live in for two weeks. We were joined by some friends, Robin's godfather Steve and his wife Tessa.

At the end of the fortnight St John's said they still could not take us for another week. Steve and Tessa promptly asked us to go and stay with them in Peterborough until accommodation was ready, and we thankfully accepted. I don't know how they survived with the six of us, but at last the college had a flat free, and we were off to Nottingham.

We liked the flat, which was upstairs in the college grounds. It was too small for us, and Caris had to sleep nightly on the landing; but at least we were in the right place and well-positioned for finding accommodation for the next two years while Geoff was a theological student.

We were disappointed that the national selectors had insisted on two years for his training. We had hoped that, with his DipTh from London University, and his years of teaching the Christian faith in Nigeria, they would agree to one year so that we could get on with the process of settling the children into schools where they could do their secondary education in peace. But it was not to be: the selectors were of the opinion that Geoff's Baptist background counted against him, and he needed the two years to understand more of what it meant to be Anglican. We were dubious about this, but had no choice.

I can't remember what I did to occupy four lively and unsettled children each day while we waited for housing. I do remember that Geoff, dissatisfied with living on benefits, went out looking for work. He signed on with an agency teaching English to Spanish children: children who were wealthy and bored and did not want to be stuck in a classroom all summer. When that came to an end, he went to a factory and broke eggs for a while. In between, we went looking for somewhere to live.

Once more we kept drawing a blank. The college did not have accommodation big enough for six. We went on praying and looking, and during this process I bumped into a couple I had known when I was a student at London University. They were living nearby because the husband happened to be on the college staff. We went round to their house for coffee and to catch up with each other on the sixteen years that had elapsed since we had all left London. While we were chatting Malcolm mentioned that he had resigned from the college and was moving to another job, and they needed to sell their house quickly.

Would we be interested?

They wouldn't have asked if they had had a quick look at our bank balance. We went back to the flat and were praying about it, when the phone rang. A close friend was calling to say she wanted to give us the money to buy a house, on the understanding that we would repay the loan when we sold it, with half of any profit. Suddenly our accommodation problems were solved. We went back to my university friends, who were delighted with the deal. The money went into their bank account without the need to involve estate agents; they moved out, we moved in and unpacked in time for the new term starting.

It was a very pleasant four-bedroomed house in a quiet crescent about a mile from the college. The local schools were used to taking students' children, and it was easy to discover from other students which were the best. Once term began in September 1986, Hannah went to Bluecoat in Nottingham, while Caris and Juliet attended a local middle school. Robin was only three and so still at home with me, but a year later went into nursery school. For the first time for very many years, I was alone in the mornings.

In January 1987 I was hoovering the bedroom one day, enjoying the fact that I could get on with chores without any little people to interrupt me. Somewhere between the bed and the window, words came into my mind.

'Geoff is getting on with his training. When are you going to do your part?'

I was glad the Hoover was noisy. Maybe it would drown out such unpleasant thoughts.

It didn't. As the weeks and months went by I could not get rid of them. My mind went back to my father's vision, and I knew in my heart I should do something about it. I just didn't want to. Once more all the old arguments rose to the surface. What about the children? I of all people knew what clergy life would be like for them. How could I consider

going for selection when our circumstances were so temporary? How could I continue to act as the anchor for the family, holding everything together while they all had to settle down to yet another situation? It didn't bear thinking about.

I had lengthy arguments with – myself? God? both? – for about six months, but I had no peace of mind at all. In the summer I finally decided what to do. I would go to my curate, whose church I was attending with the children, tell him the story and ask his advice. He was bound to say it was a ridiculous idea, not to be considered until the family was older. So I sat in John Whitcombe's study and salved my conscience by doing what I had decided. When I'd finished, I looked across at him and waited for him to say what I expected.

John had a slow grin. He said, 'It seems very sound to me, Gill.'

I expostulated. How could it possibly be a good idea? What about the children?

'Why don't you explore it a little bit? It may be a good idea to postpone it, and if so, I think the vocations advisers would recommend it. I'll take some time to think and pray about it, and I'll be in touch.'

And he was. Not long afterwards the Dean for Women's Ministry in the diocese of Southwell rang me and said she would visit at 7pm the following week.

Oh good. Just as the children were all crotchety at the end of the day, swinging from the lights, not staying in bed, squabbling over nothing, not getting on with homework. That should put her off good and proper.

The day came; I made early supper, we cleared up, the dean arrived and sat down, I offered her coffee. We chatted for about half an hour, then she left, saying she would contact me. As her tail lights disappeared down the road I was confident her visit meant the end of my journey.

So I was dismayed to be summoned to meet the Bishop's Panel one afternoon. I walked into the room and there were five people with

clipboards sitting in a semi-circle on upright chairs. I felt exactly as I had done when taking an oral exam, only this time I hadn't done any revision, I had no idea what to expect and hadn't a clue even what the subject was. I sat down gingerly on my chair and waited.

I answered their questions as best I could, and finally it was over. Geoff had come with me and we got into the car to go home, but as we drove away I had an odd sensation that a gate had closed across the path behind me. There was no going back. I was committed now to walking this track wherever it went.

Then a letter plopped onto our mat through the letter box. The Panel had decided to send me to national selection, which would take place at Wokingham in the spring of 1988.

St Columba's House was a pleasant modern place. I liked my room which was both light and warm in a cold February. I unpacked and went downstairs to have a cup of tea and start meeting the other candidates. They were easy to talk to and we got on well, swapping stories and experiences. We quickly found support in each other.

The real fun began next day. We had personal interviews with each of the selectors and also the chairman. We had tasks to do: to chair a discussion, to write a pastoral letter. I also wrote and told my father that I was sleeping very little and getting by on coffee. He was hugely interested, calm and praying.

That first morning we clustered outside the room for our initial interviews, and the selector walked down the corridor and called me in immediately. I answered his questions as best I could, but afterwards I felt depressed. I had not handled it well. I put on my black corduroy coat, dug my hands disconsolately into my pockets and went for a walk round the streets.

I was still very lukewarm about the idea of ordination. I still only saw the problems it might bring. If I did not get through, it would be a massive relief. So why, I thought, as I trudged the pavement, did I mind

that the interview with the selector had not gone well? Did I secretly want to do better than I assumed? I asked God. Or was it more mundane – I just wanted to do well, as I had always wanted. Knowing I had probably not shown myself at my best was bad for my pride. The old ego rearing its ugly head again. Right – the only thing to do with Mr Ego was to starve him of attention.

I worked it all through with God as I went, asking him to show me anything I needed. After all, I reasoned, I was only here because he had brought me here. Then, as I walked, words again formed themselves in my mind.

'I'm not going to tell you the outcome. What I am telling you is that it is right for you to be here, in this place, at this time, doing this. It is my will for you. That's all you need to know.'

A warmth crept into my spirit. By the time I got back to St Columba's, I was no wiser about outcomes, but I was feeling comforted and cheered. As I went in the front door, another candidate came out. He was wearing his coat, his hands were in his pockets, his head was down and he looked the picture of gloom.

'Just had an interview with Mr X?' I enquired. I was not surprised when he nodded.

'Hard luck.'

The three days went by in an exhaustive and exhausting process. No stone of my life was left unturned. I was grilled about my spirituality, my relationships, my experience, my opinions, my understanding of ministry and the church, my theology. The selector for education discovered that I had read English at Bedford College, London University, and said she hoped that as I clearly had a degree from a reputable place I would consider, if I were recommended, giving myself a proper education and taking a BTh. I lied politely when I said I might consider it, thinking 'As if'. If I were to be recommended, all my energy would go on just getting through a basic college course, looking after four kids and a

curate husband, and learning to tolerate parish life again without going completely off my rocker.

My final interview was with the chairman. I went into his room and sat down opposite him, a coffee table between us. I had barely settled in my chair when he said abruptly, 'I really don't know why you're here, Gill. You have four children. Your husband is completing his studies and about to go to a curacy. How do you expect to have time for training? It's a silly idea.'

It was like being on a bucking bronco and I needed to stay in the saddle. He had only articulated exactly what I thought myself. While I was pondering what to say, I heard words coming out of my mouth.

'I couldn't agree more. It is a very silly idea. I've said so myself, from the start. But then, God does have silly ideas sometimes. It was very silly to send us to Nigeria with a toddler . . .'

'If you're recommended, have you thought about training?'

Now this was a question – the only question in the three days – that I really was ready for.

'Yes, I have. I'd like to delay starting my training for a year, until my husband has his feet under the table in his curacy, and the children are settled in their new schools. Once everything is more stable at home, I'll be more ready to begin. And I'd like to train part-time. If I train full-time it will put too much of a burden on the family.'

He offered no opinion, and I was relieved when I left him. That was the last of the interviews. Only the written pastoral task to complete before we could all go home.

It was a snorter, although elements of it were familiar to me from my experience of parishes. I sat on my own in my room writing the letter by hand, imagining the situation from everyone's point of view as best I could, thinking about how my missive might be perceived by each person. It took a long time, but at last it was done, and I handed it in.

On the third day we finished with a Eucharist, had lunch together, and I hitched a lift home to Nottingham with a St John's student.

While I was going through this process, we were also looking for a parish where Geoff could 'serve his title' as a curate – rather like an apprentice. We tried very hard to stay in the Nottingham area so as to bring the least disruption to the children. They had been remarkably adaptable, all things considered, and were doing well at their schools and we didn't want to push them too far. So we followed up one curacy after another in that diocese, coming a cropper time and again over the same problem: with four children, nobody had a curate's house big enough for us. Staying in the present house was out of the question as the curate must live in the parish.

We drew one blank after another, a familiar and wearisome experience. When all available curacies failed locally, we read the church newspapers and followed up others. We had been 'exported' from the diocese of Bath and Wells, which meant we could not return there. It would have been an obvious choice for us, familiar to our family and in reach of my parents. But it was not to be. We had interviews in other parishes, with none of them working out.

That same old feeling of anxiety and being under pressure began to creep over us again. All the other students had found their parishes except for us. The end of term came closer and closer, and we were still looking. Finally, a curacy was advertised in the south-east, in a big, wealthy parish with a team of three clergy. Their last curate had just moved on, and they were looking for another.

We went to Essex to meet the rector. He turned out to be in his middle sixties with a wife of my age, and two children at the same stages as our middle two. We sat with him in his study and explained that I was candidating for ordained ministry, and that we needed a four-year curacy to give our children some stability in their education while they took public exams.

He didn't bat an eyelid.

'That would suit me well,' he said. 'I am planning to retire after three years anyway. By that time you would be experienced, and able to handle the interregnum with the team vicar until my replacement was found.'

We breathed a sigh of relief. Four years would mean that Hannah could do sixth-form with us, at a school with an excellent reputation. In four years Caris would complete GCSEs and be best placed for the inevitable onward move to another parish and sixth-form college. Juliet would reach fourteen, and change schools in time to choose her GCSE options. And Robin would go to the church primary school which was, quite literally, next door.

We looked round the curate's house. It had four bedrooms, was detached although on the same piece of land as the rectory, the church and the school, and had a garden.

Then we met leading members of the PCC, and all were in favour. We'd found our curacy.

The only remaining challenge was what to do about Hannah. She was fifteen, and was due to take GCSEs the following year, after we had moved. We discussed it with her. What would she like to do? Would she like to move to Essex with us and do her GCSEs at a new school? This would be a major disruption in her education and very difficult for her. There was an alternative; a couple whom we knew through college offered to have her for the year, enabling her to complete her exams before joining us. I researched it, and the upshot was that she chose to stay in Nottingham.

Life began to move forward. There was just one uncertainty left: what would be the outcome of my attendance at the national selection conference?

The answer took some weeks, but at last the letter came. I was recommended for training although I was to delay starting for a year. Exactly as I'd asked.

CHAPTER 5

A BUMPY RIDE

True to our track record, this move was not straightforward either. The church wanted to redecorate the curate's house for us. They let me choose carpets and wallpaper, but we could not move in directly from Nottingham. Happily, the new team vicar would not be arriving for a while, and we could use his vicarage. Unsettling, but at least we were in the right place. Geoff was ordained in Chelmsford Cathedral and began his curacy. Two months later, when the children had already started the new school year, we were able to unpack in the curate's accommodation and make it our own.

The following September saw me on my way to Oak Hill theological college. I had persuaded the selectors to let me do two years instead of three, so that I could be ordained a year before we had to leave. The rector and I planned that I would have a year as a curate with him, before Geoff and I moved to our own parish. I did not want to be in the position of having to learn my trade at the same time as Geoff was learning to be an incumbent and the family was settling into yet another completely new situation. After putting me through extra interviews the selectors agreed, and I was all set.

I went to see the college dean. As I was going to be a deacon and not a priest, I said, what sort of training could I expect? Arguments were going on throughout the Church of England as to whether women could be priests, but I had not the slightest interest. By now it was crystal clear

that my calling was to be a deacon, and I just wanted to get on with learning what it was – I had no idea – and how to do it.

He gave me the same answer I have been receiving for the twenty-eight years since I've been ordained.

'Oh – you don't do anything different from anybody else. Everyone is trained for general ministry. That's how it works.'

'But how will I find out what it means to be a deacon?'

He was puzzled. He'd obviously never been asked this before.

'Why don't you go to the librarian and see if there's any specialist reading?'

I remember being directed to a dark and lonely corner of the library, although I'm sure it was no such thing. On a high shelf in the reference section, in a box file, was a set of duplicated papers called 'Distinctive Diaconate'.

I eagerly took them to a table to look through them, and was elated to discover that the deacons had regular meetings. What's more, these were in London and would be easy to reach. I couldn't wait.

A few months later I found myself in the American Church in Tottenham Court Road at the AGM of the Diaconal Association of the Church of England. Finally I was meeting people who were called to be deacons too, people who understood my calling and my questions. For the first time I did not have to explain myself because everyone already understood. I had found my tribe, speaking my language. It was a lifeline.

I did not know what to expect from theological college. To me, it was simply the next step, something to get through in order to reach the goal God had set for me. I certainly did not expect to enjoy it. After a shaky start at essay-writing after a twenty-year gap, I took to doctrine and was surprised to earn a commendation from my doctrine tutor. It was a new experience doing something on my own, just as me. It was great to be in a fellowship group with others, to share challenges and

good times in a situation of mutual support. It was exciting to arrive and walk straight to my pigeon hole to see how I'd done with my latest essay and fun to swap notes with other students. I had two fascinating placements, one with a catholic Anglican church in Epping and the other with a family therapist. I loved it all.

It worked well with the family too. I had to commit to one evening a week and one residential weekend a month. This was ideal as it meant I could study during the day, and be free for them coming home from school in the late afternoon. Hannah had completed her GCSEs in Nottingham with excellent results, and as I started my course came to live with us in the curate's house where she joined Caris at secondary school. She was sixteen, Caris was thirteen, Juliet eleven and Robin seven. They were no longer little children needing to be watched over night and day. They were very adaptable anyway, and they had settled down remarkably quickly even for them. There were other kids of their ages in the church who attended the same schools, and they were soon going around in a gaggle of friends. Youngsters came so often to the house that in the end we installed a second doorbell with a different chime.

'That's your doorbell,' we told our children. 'When you hear that noise, you answer the door. We're going on strike!'

It was great. I was having the time of my life, but difficulties began to rear their ugly heads again.

The rector who had told us he would stay for four years, for family reasons changed his plans and left after only one. My carefully laid plans, that Geoff would be settled in his curacy before I began training, all fell apart. When I started at Oak Hill in September he was already learning what it was like to take three churches through an interregnum. We had assumed that he would be able to rely on the team vicar, except that the vicar fell victim to Ménière's disease and was ill for

many months. Geoff shouldered a huge amount of extra work just as I started college. Hardly ideal, and therefore all the more important that our family was happy and that bit older.

Then a new rector was appointed who was very different from his predecessor. I had worked very hard at my studies. I had met every deadline. I'd completed every requirement. I had passed all the tests, I had been recommended for ordination, and we students were all looking forward to it. As I was on a course for mature ordinands who were mainly in full-time jobs, most of them would be staying put where they lived and continuing in their own parishes. This was also what had been agreed for me.

The new rector had been in post for a year at this point, but was not happy at all. This would not suit him, he said. He did not want to be supervising a new curate, albeit part-time and unpaid. I should delay my ordination for a year, until we had moved on to our own parish.

I was confused. He had known my situation from the start. Why should he want to derail the process so late in the day? I explained to him that my ordination at this point in time had been agreed from the beginning with all those involved, and that I wanted some experience of parish ministry with him before we moved to our own parish.

He did not seem to believe me.

Relations had been breaking down for some time, although neither Geoff nor I knew why exactly. One of the churchwardens, Cecilia, had taken against us. She was a powerful woman of high social status who was used to telling people to jump. Life was becoming intolerable for Geoff as his ministry was systematically and deliberately undermined. She seemed determined to get rid of us both as soon as possible, and she was a strong personality.

I talked to the college staff, and then the diocesan Dean of Women's Ministry. I outlined to her what had been going on and asked the question that made me most anxious.

'Is it them or is it me? Am I doing something wrong? If so, what can I do to put it right?'

'It's not you, Gill. There's definitely a problem here. Leave it with me and I'll see what I can do.'

I was hugely relieved to discover that my ordination would indeed go ahead, but I would be licensed to the area dean and not the rector. It was a typically Anglican solution, but it worked.

So I was ordained with my friends in Chelmsford Cathedral on St Peter's Day, 1991. As the bishop laid his hands on me I knew that, as a deacon, this would be my only ordination, my one crack out of the bag and I wanted to make the most of it. God had brought me to this point. He had guided and helped and encouraged and opened doors and I was finally standing in the place he had prepared for me. My family came to support me, and it was a special moment indeed for my father as he saw the fulfilment of the vision he had received. He and I had always been close, but my becoming a deacon gave us a unique bond that lasted for the rest of his long life.

I was ready to start my curacy, although aware I needed to tread very carefully. The rector had welcomed my father and hosted my first Communion service that evening in the parish church, allowing my father to preach. I hoped that we were on the way to a better understanding. When I went to see him the next day, he told me he had decided to give me a project to do. A year would be just the right amount of time to complete it, he said. He wanted me to research provision for the elderly in the parish. I was assigned a tutor in a nearby village, I was given extra reading and I began visiting the retirement homes.

Then the rector sent me a notification from the chaplain of the nearby hospital, offering courses to train people in bereavement visiting. He asked me to get in touch with her and set it up. I arranged for her to come and lead six sessions in the parish room, and was delighted that

those who attended were very regular. We set up the visiting team and it was off the blocks before I left the parish.

Twenty years later I received a phone call. The bereavement team was still going strong and was going to have a celebration service. Would I like to attend?

I was glad to learn that something so positive had come out of my time as a curate, because I don't remember learning very much in the way of parish ministry. After a few months my supervisor, the area dean, asked to see me. How much visiting was I doing?

None, I said.

How many services had I led?

Almost none. The rector wanted me to give my time to the project with the elderly.

How much baptism visiting had I done?

None.

Funerals? Was I being trained to take those?

No.

What was I doing then?

I told him again about the project, adding that I was not allowed to attend staff meetings.

Why?

I don't know, I said carefully. The area dean was a big man, hugely experienced pastorally with a personality like a poleaxe. Far too much so for me to offer my humble opinion.

I'll talk to him, he said.

Things eased up slightly after that, which was just as well as there was a lot going on personally. Geoff and I were hunting up and down the country for our first parish (called an incumbency). True to form, it was not proving easy. Most parishes, we discovered, liked their curates and wives young with small children. A couple in their forties with a teenage

family were not top of their list, although one or two said it would be good to have us because they would be getting 'two for the price of one'. I had accepted long since that the Church of England did not take its deacons seriously. There were no jobs for deacons, although at that stage some women deacons were in positions that were traditionally filled by a male priest. Although I would be able to function as a deacon, I would not be paid.

It didn't bother me. I'd never been paid in Nigeria. It was par for the course, and we were good at managing our money. It was annoying but expected and I didn't see it as a problem. Maybe I would think differently now.

What had become a major problem was the situation with the churchwarden Cecilia. Geoff, normally easygoing and placid, had become more and more depressed. There was a constant barrage of unpleasantness and plotting as she sought as many ways as possible to force us to leave the parish early. She targeted us both, coming to see us to expostulate about things that had not happened the way she thought they should, telling me I should not have spent time listening to and praying with someone with major problems because she was waiting to take them home, warning us off, threatening us with letters to the bishop. Geoff was so miserable that if the right parish had come along early we would have considered a two-house situation for a few months: he would start his new incumbency elsewhere while I stayed on with the children, allowing them to finish their exams before joining him.

While we were contemplating this drastic step, I was summoned to Cecilia's house one evening, and Geoff was ordered to come too.

We had prayed a lot about this disastrous relationship. We had sought advice from wiser heads than ours, and Geoff had gone to counselling in an attempt to work out what he might be doing wrong, only to find the counsellor was shocked by what was happening to

him. Things were going from bad to worse, and I knew that this meeting would be extremely unpleasant.

It felt like an emotional maelstrom, but the first letter of Peter spoke powerfully to me. 'Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time' (1 Peter 5:6). It was all about letting go, and leaving the situation and its outcome up to God, without fretting or thinking that I was not getting my due. It felt easy to say and hard to do, but over time I found that the words became a source of strength.

I took the situation to my college fellowship group and asked them to pray '. . . that I'll be calm, that I won't lose my temper . . .'

We turned up at Cecilia's house and were joined by the rector and the other parish warden. She made small talk. She was sure I would know what it was like to put on make-up for a day's work without having had much sleep, wouldn't I? I mumbled something, knowing this was just preliminary, and she soon got down to it.

'We think you should move to another parish as soon as possible,' she began. 'It's time for the parish to have a change and we want to redecorate your house so that it's ready for a new curate.'

'We can't move on yet,' I said. 'The children are coming up to public exams. Caris takes her GCSEs in three months. It would be very disturbing for her to move schools at such a critical stage.'

Then she said she had been talking to other people in the church. They had noticed that my children were not happy about my training, and so they were 'concerned'.

This was news to me. I was with my children far more than other working mothers in the parish, who normally left the house before their children had had breakfast, and came home long after they returned from school. None of my children had ever said anything about finding my training difficult and in fact were rather proud of me. Cecilia went on

to make out that I was a bad mother, and that I should stop all this nonsense and get back into the kitchen where she and the rector clearly thought I belonged.

It didn't stop there. She made one false accusation after another. I held on tightly to my temper, biting my tongue, answering calmly and rationally; but when it came to the children's welfare, I would not budge.

'God's called us to ministry,' I told them. 'But it has not been easy for our children. They have already had to move around from place to place far more than most other children. I am not prepared to move them again at such a critical time. They know they are going to leave all their friends behind and start new schools this autumn. To force them to move early, ahead of exams, would be utterly disastrous.'

The bullying and hectoring went on, but I refused to cave in. Eventually the ordeal was over and we were allowed to go home. The other churchwarden had said nothing throughout, but he had a word with Geoff the following Sunday.

'Never seen anything like it. I've been a shop steward for a union and some of the discussions with managers got pretty torrid, but nothing as bad as that. It was like the Gestapo.'

Not long afterwards Geoff started getting sharp pains in his side and back, so intense that he began to vomit. He went to our local GP who immediately sent him for urgent tests. Geoff had a very enlarged kidney, a ureter which had almost closed, and he needed surgery at once.

By this time we had found a parish to go to, and were in the middle of packing.

'It's only six weeks until we move,' he objected. 'And I don't want to start my ministry as a sick man. First impressions are important.'

'I'll call in a few favours,' the doctor promised, and Geoff found himself fast-tracked into the Royal London Hospital and operated on by one of the top renal surgeons in the country. He came home and recovered rapidly, and during this time, three weeks before we moved,

I finally did my first baptism visit with the rector.

We drove home and he parked the car in front of the house. I undid my seat belt to get out, but all of a sudden he hit the steering wheel with his fist.

'Gill, I just have not been able to get my head around the fact that you are a curate and needed training in ministry. I have not given you what you needed. I am so sorry.'

I was astounded. To have such a confession from him after all this time and misery swept all the anger from my heart. I am so grateful for the grace he was given to say those words. They were healing.

I found out much later that he was a member of the Reform[2] party in the Church of England, against women being in certain positions of responsibility in the church. No wonder he had found me a problem.

2 https://www.reform.org.uk/

CHAPTER 6

A DEACON AT LAST

The Liturgy of Ordination of Deacons
The Declarations

Bishop: Deacons are called to work with the bishop and the priests with whom they serve as heralds of Christ's kingdom. They are to proclaim the gospel in word and deed, as agents of God's purposes of love. They are to serve the community in which they are set, bringing to the Church the needs and hopes of all the people. They are to work with their fellow members in searching out the poor and weak, the sick and lonely and those who are oppressed and powerless, reaching into the forgotten corners of the world, that the love of God may be made visible.

Deacons share in the pastoral ministry of the Church and in leading God's people in worship. They preach the word and bring the needs of the world before the Church in intercession. They accompany those searching for faith and bring them to baptism. They assist in administering the sacraments; they distribute communion and minister to the sick and housebound.

Deacons are to seek nourishment from the Scriptures; they are to study them with God's people, that the whole Church may be equipped to live out the gospel in the world. They are to be

faithful in prayer, expectant and watchful for the signs of God's presence, as he reveals his kingdom among us.[3]

When the children finished the summer term in 1992 we left as quickly as possible. Free from the power-play that had made life so unhappy, we were more than ready to head off to our new parish in two mining villages in the Midlands. The rectory was a nice four-bedroomed house in a walled garden, and we looked out over fields with cows in them. No longer under pressure, we had a few weeks before Geoff's induction to furnish the rectory, visit local schools, and get to know the area.

There was a lot to be done. A previous rector had been there for almost thirty years and for all sorts of reasons had virtually emptied both churches. Our immediate predecessor had been pastorally gifted and had started to mend relationships. He was a good man to follow.

It was not possible for me to be licensed to the rector as he was my husband, so again the area dean became my supervisor as I set out to discover what it meant to be a deacon in ministry. I had learned so little in my first year. I had no idea even about the role of the deacon in the liturgy. I bought a book from Church House Publishing (no longer available), and set about teaching myself.

We had an away-day with the PCC, where we prayed together and discussed what our vision should be as a church. We had a lot to learn and it was helpful to have a regular slot with the area dean where I could talk through issues in confidence.

I soon found myself in a developmental role. I introduced vision-building in different areas of church life, always working with a team which was either already in situ, or creating a team to introduce new

3 From the Bishop's charge, Ordination of Deacons, Common Worship Ordination Services, copyright © The Archbishops' Council 2007, published by Church House Publishing.

work as part of the diaconal commitment to collaborative working. There was a brilliant little group of church members running a weekly event for 8- to 12-year-olds: by moving it to a different day, praying and planning together, and getting to know families on the estate, this soon grew to a sizeable number.

Geoff and I prioritised baptism work, visiting families two or three times in advance of the baptism, explaining and encouraging. We created a shorter, informal liturgy so that they would not feel so embarrassed and self-conscious in church. We followed each baptism with a further visit, and I got together a team of baptism mums to help me start a stay-and-play group. This went really well: we had to close the register when we reached fifty children, with a waiting list of thirty. I ended each session with five minutes of a Bible story told in the simplest terms, a one-sentence prayer which the children (and their mothers) could repeat, and an action song. The mothers started to ask for copies of the story so that they could tell them again to their children at home. At Christmas, I worked with them on introducing Jesus' Birthday Party where the little ones could be involved. At last I had the freedom to be the herald of the gospel that the bishop included in his ordination charge to us.

I used the excellent 'Saints in Healing'[4] course to train a healing ministry team, a special interest of mine because of my grandfather who had been a priest with a gift of healing. We introduced Alpha courses in different ways with different groups. With my previous experience in mind, I created a parish bereavement visiting team, did some teaching on prayer and began a prayer chain in tune with the diaconal heart for intercession.

At the same time, the movement towards ordaining women as priests was gathering pace. I was soon part of the diocesan discernment process and found myself surrounded by women deacons wanting to be

4 No longer in print: see http://www.resource-arm.net/

priested. I listened to their stories, finding some easier to accept than others. During one discussion I questioned some of the reasons given for priesting, wondering if they were in fact 'kingdom values'.

I was surprised not only to get away with saying this, but also because I was asked to repeat what I'd said. Clearly some people had always felt called to priesthood, and simply wanted to be able to move into God's will for their lives.

Other motives struck me as bizarre. One woman told us that she wanted to be able to consecrate the sacraments of bread and wine because it was 'taboo'.

In all this I was conscious of being inwardly settled. All the arguments were happening outside my zone. They had nothing to do with me, I felt. Being a deacon was where I belonged – more than this, a deacon was who I was, and who I was becoming. Somewhere in the core of my spirit was a place of untouchable peace, something which is still there.

Even so, I was expected to go through the whole discernment process. At an interview with the archdeacon and the Dean of Women's Ministry, the dean suddenly turned on me, accusing me of being like John the Baptist, wanting to be a voice crying in the wilderness, getting off on being different from others. I tried again to articulate the sense of peace, of being in the ministry God wanted for me, of neither wanting nor needing anything different.

I am not sure whether they passed this information on to the bishop. We had individual interviews with him: I sat in the bishop's palace and waited for my turn in the beautiful drawing room upholstered in pale green, with the light coming through huge windows which overlooked the lush garden. Then I was ushered into his study, and as I was putting my bag on the floor he said, 'Well, Gill, from what I know of your ministry already, I would have no hesitation whatsoever in ordaining you a priest.'

No small talk then. I knew Bishop Simon a little. We had something in common, as we had all worked in Nigeria. He was a missionary bishop, unusual in those days, and had been an unfailing source of support. I thanked him.

'I've given it a lot of thought and prayer,' I told him. 'I am still entirely content to be a deacon, still sure that this is what God has called me to.'

He beamed at me happily.

'I thought you might say that.'

We chatted for a few more minutes, then he prayed with me, and I went home.

What I struggled most with was the argument about equality. I understood it all right. Men and women are created equal. They are both given spiritual gifts. The only reason women weren't allowed to be priested was because the Church of England had yet to put this equality into practice. It was about time that happened.

We had good friends who were passionately opposed, but for different reasons. In the blue corner were Anglo-Catholic priests, especially those belonging to the newly-founded Forward in Faith[5] movement, angry and grieving over what they believed to be solely a male calling. The church could not overturn two thousand years of tradition without doing severe damage to herself and to her relationships with other denominations, like the Roman Catholics and the Orthodox Church, they said.

In the red corner were the conservative evangelicals, many belonging to the recently-begun Reform movement, with their powerful conviction that the Bible teaches that women should not be in any kind of spiritual leadership. The Church of England needed 'reforming' from such errors.

5 https://www.forwardinfaith.com/

I respected both these positions. They were honestly held. But I did not find them convincing, and for the same reason. It seemed to me that the Holy Spirit was poured out on both men and women, and his gifts given to all indiscriminately: men, women, even children (Joel 2:28-29, Acts 2:17, Acts 2:1-4). If the Holy Spirit was calling and gifting women to be ministers in Christ's church, then we had better mind our manners. If we opposed it, then as Gamaliel warned in the book of Acts, we would find we were opposing God himself.

Even so, I continued to be uneasy about the equality argument because somehow it didn't ring true. In my view we were all equal anyway: equally sinners; equally loved by God. So much of the stuff that was written and quoted seemed to me sub-Christian: a secular argument commandeered by a section of our church for its own purposes. I didn't trust it.

In this muddled state of mind I set off in my car to drive to the cathedral for the first-ever priesting of women in our diocese. I was glad for my friends that they were at last being given the liberty to take up a calling some of them had felt for many years. But I still had a shedload of unanswered questions. Somewhere along the road I said aloud, 'Lord, I'm happy to go to this to support my friends. But please, I'd rather you didn't spring a surprise on me out of the blue and suddenly announce that I should be a priest after all . . . but I do know I need to be open to you.' I most certainly did not want to be a priest, but I also knew by now that God had ways of convincing me to do things I didn't want to do.

Ordinations are always services of delight, packed with family and friends all rejoicing in this culmination of each candidate's time of exploration and study. The women were duly ordained priest. Each was given her stole, which they put on in the priest's way, hanging open round the neck. Mine stayed securely tied under the right arm, the sign of my diaconate.

Then they were invited to turn round and face us all. They were radiant, smiling at all their supporters in the congregation. The thought stabbed me: 'They look equal. They are equal,' and at the same time a crystal-clear awareness, 'You will never be seen as equal.'

I stopped being aware of what was going on around me. Right now I was being forced to face up to visible equality, and to realise sharply the sacrifice it would mean for me. I did not want to be fooled into something simply because of a false understanding of equality. As I knelt automatically for the intercessions, I had one prayer in mind.

'Lord, I don't get this equality thing. I never have. What I really want to know is, what do *you* think equality means? Because what you think is the only thing that matters.'

I bowed my head for prayer. The voice leading us in prayer sank into the background, because into my mind came the words from Philippians:

> *Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not think equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself . . . (Philippians 2:5-7 ESV)*

Such familiar words, but they swept over me like a torrent of light. Suddenly I understood the whole thing freshly. Equality was not to be grasped. Equality was something to be given up, just as Jesus did. I was being called to do the same.

By the time we reached the Peace, my mind had cleared. We shook hands with the people around us and one woman looked pityingly at my deacon's stole.

'Never mind. It'll be your turn next.'

It wasn't the right time to tell her joyfully that no, it would not be my turn next. My turn had already come.

It was a life-changing understanding, but there was more. Some weeks later I was assisting Geoff at a service of Holy Communion.

I took up the chalice, ready to share it with the people: one of my favourite things. Standing there in the chancel of the little medieval church of St Wilfrid, sun shafting across the floor through stained-glass windows, at such a beautiful moment hot words like bullets came out of nowhere and raked my spirit.

'You will always be seen as second best and second rate.'

Truth, and it would mark all my ministry. The words were accurate and somehow mocking. I felt exposed, and insecure, and distressed. This was the rest of my life I was looking at.

As I stepped forward I looked at the silver cup in my hand, and the warm red wine gleamed in a shaft of sun coming through the colours in the window. Unexpectedly, more words followed and they posed a question.

'Are you willing to accept this for my sake?'

The tone of this voice was different from the last and I knew immediately whose it was. Doubt fled away.

'You'll have to help me, Lord.'

I lowered the chalice to the lips of the first communicant. My sacrifice was a drop in the ocean of God's love.

While I was wrestling with all this I was also a member of the executive committee of the Diaconal Association of the Church of England, the group where I had first met those of my own tribe. The priesting of women decimated our numbers, which took me aback. I had wrongly assumed that those who belonged to the Association were deacons by vocation. It was now clear that most of the women who had been members regarded themselves as being in the waiting-room for priesthood. There was one good thing about it: the few of us who were left were the ones with lifelong diaconal vocations.

Our president, Canon Ann Wren, galvanised us into activity. The order of deacons has always been seen by the main denominations

as part of the three-fold order of ordained ministry: bishop, priest and deacon. Yet very few people in the Church of England, at any level, understood what a deacon was and did. It was now our task to clarify this for our own church, with the aim of persuading them to start taking our vocation and ministry seriously. Ann set up a consultation at St George's House[6] in Windsor, where Roman Catholic, Methodist and Orthodox deacons were invited to observe and contribute. We listened to speakers then broke into small groups, tackling different aspects of the diaconate and pooling our thoughts in a short document we called the Windsor Statement.[7]

We knew that the House of Bishops was setting up a working party on our ministry, in order to present a report to General Synod. We were not surprised to discover that this working party did not initially include any deacons: we were all by now used to our church's benevolent neglect. The working party was persuaded to take on two deacons, and eventually the report went to Synod in 2001 under the title 'For such a time as this'.

Our hope was not overly ambitious: simply that the church would take forward the recommendations of the report as part of their mission and ministry strategy. We thought of it as our next step, a contribution to the work of the church in the world, a work that was shared with many other ordained and lay people. It never occurred to us that anyone would find this objectionable.

We were therefore taken aback to discover that the House of Laity refused to accept the report. A group of readers strongly resisted its

6 'a place where people of influence and responsibility in every area of society can come together to explore and communicate their views and analysis of contemporary issues'. https://www.stgeorgeshouse.org

7 The Windsor Statement on the Diaconate (Windsor, St George's House, UK: 1997).

proposals and it failed. It was sent back to the dioceses for further work.

It became clear that although there were some genuine reservations about the report, many of the readers felt that deacons in some way threatened their ministry. We realised that they still had not understood that the ministry of deacons was complementary to that of readers and priests. We really did not want to 'take their jobs'.

Even so, the DACE executive had to go back to the drawing board. Although deacons learn to be resilient, it was a serious blow, one from which DACE never really recovered.

This did not mean that those of us called to be deacons were in any way dismayed or routed. I was now the only vocational deacon in the diocese: out of thirty-three women deacons, thirty-two had been priested. During this time I attended a diocesan meeting and at lunch found myself sitting next to an area dean from elsewhere in the diocese. When he discovered that I was still a deacon he commented tartly, 'Ah yes. Remind me what you can't do?'

I explained.

'That's no good to me. I need hands that can do Communion.'

I now refuse to talk about our ministry in terms of what we 'can't do'. It is a positive ministry, given to the church by the Holy Spirit through the apostles. This clear calling helps us to be resilient, and I found that a good way to develop that resilience in the face of such attitudes was to have fellowship with another deacon. Failing an Anglican, I began to meet regularly with a Methodist deacon for conversation and prayer, and took part in discussions at the Methodist Diaconal Centre in Birmingham. It did my heart good to discover once more that 'my tribe' existed nearby and that we held so much in common.

I had plenty of other challenges to keep me occupied. When I completed four years of my curacy, I asked the archdeacon where I would next work. He was taken aback. He clearly had given it no thought.

I suppose he assumed I would continue to work with my husband, rather than follow the pattern of all other curates and move on once the first curacy was complete.

He took some time to think about it, then asked me if I would like to help out in a nearby parish. I knew they were in trouble because their vicar had serious health problems and had not been able to minister for more than a year. I said yes like a shot, and went to meet the little team struggling to keep things going there: the two churchwardens, the deputy wardens and the reader.

We hit it off straightaway and right from the start worked really well together. They were practical and organised, and only too relieved to have me around to catch up with the backlog of pastoral work, and to help them with organising the services. We prayed together and laughed together, my happiest time in ministry.

Except for one thing. I discovered that there was another clergyman, Tom, who was developing his own ministry in the same village without telling me. He was visiting the same people as I was, and offering them his personal guidance. They talked to me about it as some of them were in difficult pastoral situations, and they were confused with the two of us going and advising them differently.

I had set it up that he and I should meet regularly for discussion and prayer, but when I asked him about it he denied it.

I recall this as being really tricky. He was senior to me and well respected, and I had no idea what to do about someone who was telling me to my face something I knew not to be true. Eventually, after a lot of thought, I contacted a senior diocesan officer and asked him what was happening. Was the expectation that I be accountable to Tom, who, after all, was senior to me? I would be happy to do so – all I needed was some clarification.

No, I was not accountable to him, said his voice on the phone.

Then why was he replicating the pastoral work I had been sent to do, and then pretending that he wasn't?

He didn't answer the question. I asked if I could please have a job description for my work, so I knew where the boundaries of my responsibility lay.

'Oh, I think there's a document somewhere. I'll see if I can find it.'

The document never came.

I continued working closely with the parochial church council, organising Lent groups, preaching at ecumenical events, running confirmation classes, taking school assemblies. I did whatever the PCC asked, careful to stay within their remit. I knew I had no authority of my own but was there simply to serve. With such an excellent working relationship, it was a joy.

One day the area dean phoned me. How was I getting on? I told him honestly that it was going well and that I loved it. Then he said, 'Have you had any further thoughts about your vocation?'

I knew immediately what he meant. Was my experience of working with this church persuading me to think in terms of priesthood? If I were to say yes, I might be asked to consider looking after the parish more permanently.

He couldn't have known that this question had already crossed my mind. I had talked it over with my spiritual director, who in our initial meeting had been very dismissive of my vocation.

'You'll never amount to anything in the Church of England if you stay a deacon, Gill. You know that, I assume. You'll never make incumbent or anything else. You're going nowhere.'

I suppose I should have realised then that he was the wrong spiritual director for me. I wasn't interested, I told him, in 'amounting to anything'. I disliked the implication that I needed to be ambitious, to 'make' something of my ministry. It seemed to me entirely self-evident that this

was not a kingdom value.

He was not convinced, so when I went to him with the area dean's question, he was very keen for me to consider it seriously. I said, 'I do take it seriously. I hugely respect the area dean. He would not raise the subject if he thought there was no point. But . . .' here I hesitated, and looked at him. I wasn't sure whether he would understand what I was about to say. I wasn't sure I understood it myself.

'. . . but somehow, it feels less like guidance and more like a temptation.'

No, he didn't.

So I thought it through myself, and realised something important. Yes, it might be fun to be that parish's priest, to build on the excellent relationship we had established and to take them forward. But I would not be there for ever, and then what? Would I want to be a priest somewhere else?

Once I asked myself that question, the answer was crystal clear. My heart sank at the prospect. I really had no wish at all to be a priest. My identity still lay in the joy of the diaconate. One of the reasons I was so happy in that parish was because it fulfilled the serving and enabling ministry at the heart of my vocation.

So many people found, and still find it impossible to accept this. I have kept two letters, written by two retired priests, urging me to seek priesting and telling me that my ministry warranted it. They were not the only people who felt obliged to pressurise me into considering priesthood. It seemed, and it still seems to me and many other deacons, that such people have no understanding of what a diaconal ministry was and is. I also realised that they would never find out, unless I told them.

Things took a turn for the worse with Tom, the clergyman who was visiting behind my back. The churchwardens contacted me and told me that he had summarily disbanded our working team.

There had been no discussion. He had not mentioned it to me, and I had no idea why he would want to do away with something which was working so well.

Do not overreact, I warned myself inwardly. This church has had enough to put up with. Do not let them know of the tensions. Your job is to be here for them.

'Did he say why?' I asked.

'No,' they said. 'He just said he was disbanding us.'

I could not understand this guy's motivation. What possible benefit could there be in disbanding such an effective team? And what was his authority to do so? And whom could I ask? And was I making a mountain out of a molehill? Should I just ignore it?

That was more easily said than done. Instead of having a single meeting with the wardens and reader, when we would plan the next quarter together, discuss the issues, pray and come to a common mind, I had to make phone calls individually to each person on the original team. It took a great deal of extra time and racked up my expenses. And it was pointless.

I decided to phone my father, in parish ministry in the south-west. I told him what was happening, and asked his advice.

'You need to tell someone,' he said. 'A senior diocesan officer should know about this. That man is trying to destroy your ministry,' he added bluntly.

The next day I phoned a superior. I did not even get to the end of my first sentence. He cut me off sharply and made it clear he had no time for my complaints. I said again that if Tom was in charge, then I was happy to work with him. If he was not, then what should I do? He gave me no answer and ended the discussion.

I put the phone down and sat at my desk in the study, gazing unseeingly at the photos on the wall. How could I continue to work

under such constraints, when I was not only being given no alternative, but I was not being heard and I was clearly viewed as a nuisance? In the end I rang the area dean, who asked me to go and see him.

I was thankful that he listened. I explained about the questions I had for our superior and my bewilderment in not having any guidance from him. I was told that this officer considered me and Tom to be 'as bad as each other' and I was very taken aback. I had only contacted him twice. Each time I had thought that my questions were reasonable in the circumstances. This was my first indication that Tom had been on the phone to them both, constantly complaining about me, although I was at a loss to know what his problem was. I stared at the dean, not knowing what to say.

'I think I'd better get everyone together round the table,' he decided. 'We'll try and sort it out that way.'

I didn't have to wait long. I found myself in the area dean's dining room, with my superior at the head of the table, the dean at the foot and Tom opposite. I sat down.

He was asked to go first. He rattled off a host of things I was supposed to have done, all of it untrue. I remember my sense of shock. Why would he do this? Was it an intense personal dislike? Did he suspect me of some underhand motive? When at last it was my turn I began carefully, 'Well, I don't see it that way at all.'

And that was all I said, because immediately my superior interrupted. 'We'll draw a veil over that,' he said, gesturing with his hand.

Why? I thought. Why was time and attention given to a pack of lies, but my voice was not to be heard? I was suddenly very conscious of being the only female in a room of ordained men with more authority than me. I was also a deacon, not a priest, and I felt I was being treated as second class, as if my contribution had no value. God's question to me in the church sanctuary became real. This was where the rubber hit the

road. 'Are you willing to accept this for my sake?'

The meeting broke up soon afterwards, with no decision made. I then discovered that Tom had been told later to stop interfering. I was hugely relieved.

Then all became clear. It appeared there was already a discussion going on about whether he would take over the parish in which I was working.

I then discovered that he, too, like the rector in our previous parish, belonged to Reform, sharing its negative views on women in leadership. No wonder it had all gone pear-shaped.

I have no idea why nobody was open with me. It would have helped me enormously. If I had understood that he was slated to become vicar of the parish, then I would have understood his attitude and would have been able to work out a different relationship with him. If I had known he were a member of Reform, it would have explained why he treated me so negatively and given me the chance to adapt.

The following year he became the priest for that parish, and I left with a heavy heart. Then in 1997 a parish near our own became vacant. The diocese added those three villages to the two Geoff had already, and agreed that I should work in the new parish.

CHAPTER 7

MOVING ON

When Geoff took a first exploratory walk round the church and graveyard of the new parish he bumped into a guy who lived nearby.

'Are you the new vicar?' he demanded.

'Looks like it.'

'Have you come to get crucified?'

'What do you mean?'

'They crucified the last few. They'll crucify you too.'

Not a promising start.

The churches we inherited were deeply divided, with one congregation aggressively favouring the *Book of Common Prayer* and traditional hymns, and the other a more informal worship style. We soon discovered that this was part of a decades-old pattern of the conservative element in the congregation browbeating not only the vicar but those who did not agree with them.

In addition, the members of the parochial church council were furious. They wanted a proper process by which they could choose their own vicar. They didn't want nearby clergy foisted on them whether they liked it or not.

It was tricky and delicate, needing careful handling as we did not want to have such a negative start. Our suffragan bishop wrote a letter for us, which he asked us to read out to the council. We hadn't even met

them yet. We were having to start our ministry with this letter and an explanation which would be far from popular.

When we walked into that first meeting with the church council, we could physically feel the hostility. There was not a smile anywhere on those rows of faces. We listened and we talked, and we read out the bishop's letter. They made it abundantly clear that they had no time for it whatsoever. Finally, as the meeting drew to its close, one lone voice muttered 'you're welcome here'. We were grateful to her, but it was patently untrue.

What had caused this cold anger? The only way to get to the bottom of it was for me to visit each church council member in their home. I spent the time listening to them, hearing about their lives and their families, their hopes and fears and concerns. My final question to all of them was, 'What do you think the church needs now?'

It was interesting to discover that, no matter how enraged they had been in the meeting, most of them felt that disunity as a church was their biggest problem. And in their own homes nobody was hostile, but warm and welcoming.

Gradually I assembled the picture. The evening congregation, strongly traditional, had hated the fact that the *Mission Praise* hymnbook and more informal worship had been foisted on them, as they felt, without any discussion and without their consent. Many of them had worshipped at the church all their lives, and felt betrayed. They were strong personalities too and swept the board at PCC meetings.

The morning congregation, by contrast, hated formality and felt much closer to God with livelier songs and a more open style of worship. They struggled with the opinions and attitudes of the others. Everyone had been hurt. They just showed it differently.

I decided to take the bull by the horns. My experience of church life was that the longer a major problem was ignored, the bigger it grew until it became the elephant in the room. There was nothing for it but to

try and tackle the issues. I put together a simple questionnaire about worship, and gave it to everyone. Then I collated all the responses, and set them out in a presentation for the next PCC meeting.

It was the age of overhead projectors, and I made my central image a lighthouse. I put it to them that the lighthouse was like the Anglican Church. It was founded on the rock of Christ, the rock in the ocean of life on which the church was built. The base of this Anglican building was the *Book of Common Prayer*, written by Cranmer so that ordinary people would understand worship in their own language. All Anglican worship developments since then had been built on this book. But, I said, the purpose of the whole lighthouse, no matter what the worship style, was to beam out the light of Jesus to those around, especially those in trouble in the storms of life.

They discussed it, and we put our proposal to them. We're very blessed in the Church of England, I said, with the huge range of liturgy given to us from which to choose. The proposal is that on Sunday evenings we celebrate the beautiful traditions of our liturgy at Evensong with the *Book of Common Prayer* and traditional hymns. We won't change it. The morning congregation will be the one where new forms of worship and more recent songs will be used. That way, we get the best of all possible worlds.

It was just as well, I thought privately, that Geoff and I enjoyed both styles.

I don't remember anyone being over-enthusiastic about it, but when it was put to the vote it was passed unanimously. Many years later, long after we left that parish, the most assertive council member phoned me and said, 'You and Geoff brought us a lot of healing as a church.' There had been no sign from her or anyone else that this was what they thought at the time. It was something of a revelation, and an encouragement to deal with problems early before they spun out of control.

Tackling this issue taught me that deacons were still working in the inheritance left to us by the Seven, those in the book of Acts (chapter 6:1-7) who had been chosen out of the congregation to deal with ethnic problems between Jewish and Greek widows. Clearly reconciliation had been a part of our diaconal ministry right from that beginning.

Apart from this, I began developmental work again, encouraging the church in intercessory prayer in different ways, leading Bible study groups, starting a new youth group and a new Sunday school. There was a little church plant in one of the villages, and I worked with a couple on leading that and putting it on a firmer footing. I was able to access training for this couple and continued to mentor them. When I left it was with the joy of knowing that small group of people was in the good hands of a couple who cared for them and loved them and understood where they were coming from. One of my best memories is of doing the baptism of a lady in her seventies, who had recently started coming back to that church because it was local to her, and wanted to make a greater commitment.

'My brother's coming to my baptism,' she said. She was a substantial lady.

'Brilliant!'

'He says you'll need a block and tackle to lift me up over the font.'

Meanwhile, in the main village, some church members started a weekly meeting in the church hall for the elderly and housebound. They picked up the more disabled from their homes, fed them tea and cake, did songs and games with them, and generally gave them something to which they could look forward. There was a great deal of love and care in what they did, and the churchwarden asked me one day if I would do an occasional service for them. It was a superb idea and I put together a basic form of morning worship using more traditional language, as many of them had previously attended church until poor health kept them away. We chose familiar hymns which the church organist played on a keyboard.

Then I was asked to do a simple service of Communion by Extension. I put on my robe and stole, set up a little table with a white cloth, candles and a cross, and began. I'll never forget the atmosphere in that unprepossessing hall. It was holy, almost awed, a place where the Lord himself would have felt right at home.

Then I realised. No. He did feel right at home. He was there with those elderly, crippled folk who wanted to receive him in bread and wine, and he was there in the hearts of the church members caring for them.

The charge to deacons in the ordination service reads:

> *They are to work with their fellow members in searching out the poor and weak, the sick and lonely and those who are oppressed and powerless, reaching into the forgotten corners of the world, that the love of God may be made visible.*[8]

However, such wow-moments were few and far between. I had broadened my ministry by becoming a member of the Diocesan Pastoral Strategy Group, and was deanery representative to the Spirituality Group and secretary to the Offa Retreat House Committee. I also became a spiritual director and vocations adviser, and joined the team of the Diocesan Deliverance Adviser. Contributing in this way helped me develop a bigger picture and I learned a great deal, but even so, after several years working in the parish I felt I was getting stale. Church resources and people were very limited and there were only so many missional initiatives that could be maintained. After a few months of prayer and very hard thinking I decided I would like to explore a more administrative role elsewhere in addition to my part-time parish work. Business studies, shorthand and typing had made up my postgraduate training course, long before mission service and ordination, and I was

8 Common Worship Ordination Services, copyright © The Archbishops' Council 2007, published by Church House Publishing.

doing daily administration in parish life. I'd always liked it, and I enrolled on a course in the local town for older people wanting to return to work.

I hadn't even begun the course when the totally unexpected happened. I discovered that the International Department at Coventry Cathedral needed administrative help. The cathedral canon in charge of the department at that time was Andrew White, later to gain himself a big reputation for his work in Iraq. He asked me to job-share with a woman who was a university lecturer in peace studies.

My time there was something of a switchback, but it was a blessing to be part of cathedral life and its worldwide reputation for reconciliation. This had begun in the Second World War, when the Germans had carpet-bombed Coventry with many lives being lost. The old cathedral was destroyed, leaving only the outer walls standing, including the east end. Provost Richard Howard walked into the smoking ruins the next day, and said that he wanted these words on the east wall: *Father, forgive.* Three of the medieval roof nails were picked out of the rubble and were formed into the shape of a cross, iconic now throughout the world as a sign of reconciliation. In the 1960s Sir Basil Spence designed a new cathedral alongside the remains of the old.

Every Friday at noon, no matter what we were doing, we would leave our desks and run down to the ruins where one of the canons would stand at the big stone altar at the east end. Over his head were the words requested by Provost Howard, FATHER, FORGIVE. Any visitors were welcomed, then we would all say together the Litany of Reconciliation.[9] I had no idea then that this would become the foundation for Geoff's and my future ministry.

My role was a desk job handling paperwork, so I was very surprised to discover that Andrew had recommended me to the bishop for training

9 http://www.coventrycathedral.org.uk/ccn/the-coventry-litany-of-reconciliation/

in reconciliation. I was to attend a course by Bridge Builders,[10] a Mennonite group with a track record in delivering effective teaching for those wanting to become involved in peace-making at different levels and in different contexts, including those of churches embroiled in bitter arguments as ours had been. It was one of the best things I ever did, and opened up a whole new area of ministry which has continued to influence me ever since and to be a useful tool in many different and unexpected circumstances.

They were busy years, working in both the cathedral and the parish and also completing my college course in business studies. Our son Robin was the only child still with us, and he was taking A-levels and making preparations to leave home. I thrived on the challenges and contrasts, but God had other ideas.

During the course of my work at the cathedral I met a longstanding member of its community, Jane Williams, who worked full time in children's health services in the NHS. Jane had been supporting a health education project in Sibiu, Romania, since 1994, funded by the charity SHARE[11] in the UK. She held an annual Romania lunch for cathedral supporters of the project and invited me to go along. It kicked off a chain of events which would lead us in a direction we'd never considered.

Sorting through some files in the Coventry office one day, I discovered an old job description for 'an Anglican couple, one of whom must be a priest' which had been advertised three years previously by the Church Mission Society. It was part of Jane's project. A couple was wanted to manage and develop a small Cross of Nails 'centre for reconciliation' in a village in Romania, as part of the medical and social work already being run by a Romanian team begun by two of Jane's friends.

10 https://www.bbministries.org.uk/

11 https://beta.charitycommission.gov.uk/charity-details/?regid=1002326&subid=0

I took it home. Geoff was not at all keen. 'What would I do?' he enquired. He didn't fancy running a little centre. That was my scene as an administrator. We discussed it and prayed about it for many weeks, met those involved and looked at pictures of the work and of the centre. At length I knew the answer to Geoff's question: 'Put on your cassock and go and make friends.' It was a joke at the time. We'd no way of knowing what it would come to mean.

The suggestion that we should consider this job seriously came at a critical time for us. We were completing ten years in the parishes and had reached the stage of feeling that we had done all we could. We were running out of vision and it was time to hand on to another minister with fresh ideas and a new approach. We had already started looking around at other parishes, including some which would be closer to my parents in Wiltshire. We went for a number of interviews, but nothing clicked.

Then the Romania job came along. We had of course been mission partners previously for many years in Nigeria, so had a realistic understanding of what would be involved, especially the learning of a new language. Did we really want to do this, given that we were both now in our fifties?

Once a missionary, always a missionary. We still had a heart for going abroad, but we were very concerned about my parents. Geoff's mother and father had died some time since, but mine were now in their early eighties. We wanted to be around for them as they grew older. I had a sister and two brothers, but they lived even further away from them than we did.

It was time to make a decision about the Romania job, and we decided the best thing to do was to go and see Mum and Dad on our next day off, and raise the subject with them. Geoff and I agreed that they would probably not be happy to see us go and if that were the case, we'd certainly stay. After all they had done for us in the past, the least we could do was to support them now.

On the next day off we drove to Wiltshire to visit them on the edge of Melksham. They were very happy and settled there, where my father had sufficient garden for him to tend to his gardener's heart's content. We sat down with them for a cup of coffee. They already knew that we were looking for a move, and Dad in particular had taken a lively interest in the parishes we had seen and in our search. We knew, too, that he and Mum were holding us in their prayers, as they always did.

Sitting in their quiet living room, with its muted colours of rose and fawn, eating a biscuit with our drink, Dad asked us how we were getting on. Geoff took him through our most recent experiences in looking for a parish, in our own diocese of Coventry, in his diocese of Salisbury, and in Bath and Wells where our ordained story had started. Nothing was leading anywhere.

Then Dad said something completely unexpected. Putting down his cup he enquired, 'Why don't you think of going abroad again?'

We stared at him in silence. Playing for time I said, 'Why do you say that?'

'Well, you're not getting anywhere in finding anything in this country. Maybe you should think more widely – go back into mission work. That's where your heart is.'

'But Dad,' I said, 'what about you and Mum? You know we want to be around for you both as you get older.'

'Oh,' he replied, 'the two of us have talked about that. We may be in our early eighties but we're in very good health. We have lots of friends. Our medical care is excellent. And you have a sister and a brother still in the country – it's not as if we won't have any family.'

I looked at my mother. I knew that of the two of them, she would likely find it hardest. 'What do you think, Mum?'

'Darling, Dad and I are completely agreed that if God is calling you to do something, then you should do it. It's the way we've always tried to live, and you would have our full support.'

She was putting a brave face on it, as she always did. On the other hand, Mum adored little children more than anything else, and ours had grown up and left home. My sister and brother had had their children a long time after ours and they were all still young and gave my parents much pleasure.

'Well,' I said, 'it's funny you should say that . . .'

Another extraordinary moment. There was no doubt that the Holy Spirit was indeed at work in my parents' minds and hearts as well as in our own. We had been afraid to raise the possibility of going abroad with them, but they had taken the initiative and were very clear that, as far as they were concerned, this could be the right way forward for us. And I was able to assure them that, if there should be an emergency, I could fly home from Romania in three hours.

With the last hesitation overcome we went to CMS's selection conference and were taken on as reconciliation workers for the Cross of Nails work in Sibiu in Romania. But first, in January 2002, we moved to Crowther Hall, their training college in Selly Oak in Birmingham, on a one-term mission refresher course.

CHAPTER 8

UNDERCOVER DEACON

Crowther Hall was a mixed blessing. On the one hand it was a time of freedom from responsibility. We got on very well with our fellow students and had a lot of fun. On the other hand, our previous mission training before we went to Nigeria had been of a very high standard and it was difficult doing business with a course that was under-resourced. In addition the second half of our time was spoilt for me as I had the first of what would become many bouts of fibromyalgia, meaning that I had pain in every joint in my body and experienced total exhaustion. Medical help was ineffective and so I spent a lot of time necessarily on the bed resting, only able to do the minimum of study. It was hugely frustrating.

Despite this, we both made progress in preparation for our new life. We were amazed to discover a Romanian Orthodox priest on the course. Father Vasile Mihoc had come on a scholarship to do some research, and we were even more surprised to find that he came from Sibiu, the town where we were headed in the Transylvania region of Romania. He was tall and impressive with a long grey beard, who always wore his cassock, and told us he had thirteen children. We asked him about Orthodoxy, learning about icons and hearing some of his experiences as a parish priest and a Professor of New Testament in the Andrei Şaguna Orthodox Faculty of Theology in Sibiu.

It wasn't all plain sailing, especially for me. Meeting Fr Vasile torpedoed me into a crisis about my vocation. Our regional manager at

CMS was himself Orthodox, and he warned me, 'Do not tell anyone that you're a deacon. The Orthodox are absolutely against women in ministry.'

'But I'm not a priest,' I objected. 'I can understand their refusal to accept a woman priest. But I'm a deacon – surely that makes a difference.'

'No it doesn't. If you don't want to ruin your ministry in Romania, you must not mention this at all.'

I was dismayed, to put it mildly. I had assumed that I would be free to practise my ministry as a deacon in Romania, alongside Geoff as managers of the Cross of Nails centre. I had imagined leading services in English with tiny congregations of Anglican visitors there. Now it was being taken away from me. What was this about?

I decided to go to the top. 'What's going on, Lord? I believe you're calling us to Romania – but I will have to hide my vocation? After all the trouble you took to guide us into ordained ministry? It just doesn't make any sense. And – it's very upsetting.'

While agonising over this I read the beginning of Luke's Gospel, where old words leapt out at me with fresh meaning. 'Jesus himself was about thirty years old when he began his ministry' (3:23).

I began to think. What had Jesus done for those thirty years? All we're told is that he was obedient to Mary and Joseph. Joseph is not mentioned again in any of the gospel narratives. Had he died? Did Jesus, as the eldest son, take on the responsibility of Joseph's trade in order to feed the family until his brothers grew up and could share it? Who knows?

One thing struck me forcibly. Nobody knew who he was. For his fellow townsfolk he was just Joseph's son. He had lived and worked and eaten and slept and studied and played and chatted like any other Jewish lad, his true significance hidden. It was not until his baptism at the hands of John that his ministry began openly.

So the Father had asked the Son to live his first thirty years with his identity and purpose unseen. And he was asking me to spend a few years doing the same.

What was good enough for him, I thought, much cheered, was good enough for me.

Truth has a habit of outing itself, though. The following year I was sitting at a meal table in Sibiu with some Romanian Orthodox theology students in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. We were talking, and then suddenly one looked at me very directly and said, 'What are you in your church? What do you do?'

I panicked. This was the one piece of information I had been strictly enjoined not to reveal. I wondered what I could say that would hide it, while at the same time not lying. 'What do you mean?' I asked, frantically rehearsing what I could or could not say.

'What are you in your church? Because the Church of England has women priests now,' he said. It could not have been more pointed and direct. There was nothing for it but to come clean.

'I'm not a priest,' I reassured him. 'But I am a deacon – a permanent deacon.'

He nodded. 'We have deacons in the Orthodox Church too, but they are all men. We think there were women deacons in the Byzantine Church, but nobody is quite sure what they did.'

I left it there. Discretion was the better part of valour.

Before all this there was much to be done. In September 2002 we took our son to Bath University and settled him in there, where he would be near my parents. We told him to come and visit us for Christmas, in case he was homesick. By this time he had spent a year living independently so we had few qualms.

We had shopping and packing to do and goodbyes to be said before we were finally on the flight to Bucharest. We took the train from there and were met at Sibiu station by two members of the medical team set up by Jane's friends. They showed us round their centre in the city, then drove us out to the little village where a house had been bought with

outbuildings. Over the years since the fall of communism, teams of volunteers had come out regularly from the UK, driving lorries and vans full of the equipment that was hard to find in Romania at that time. Building work had been done on the main house and volunteers had beefed up the outbuildings to form dormitories and a meeting space. The idea was that we should develop it as a Cross of Nails centre, holding discussions and hosting small ecumenical conferences and activities. We looked round, settled into one of the bedrooms and then were taken out for a meal.

We spent that initial autumn adjusting to a different culture and language. The first thing was to sign up with a language school in Sibiu where we attended lessons twice a week. Then we went around the countryside with the members of the medical and social team, looking at the work they were doing in schools and clinics. They were doing an excellent job, but when we tried to get to know them, it became obvious very quickly that they were not keen on having us around. Romanians are much blunter than the English, and they told us that they couldn't understand what our project had to do with theirs. They made it clear that they were not religious and did not want our trying to start anything faith-based with them. We suggested saying the Cross of Nails Litany each Friday afternoon with them when they had finished work for the week, but this was not successful. They were pleasant but distant, and tended to disappear on Fridays when we arrived.

We knew that the original vision had been for a 'one-stop shop' with the medical, social and ecumenical Cross of Nails work all under one roof. As the medical staff had not taken this on board we were in trouble before we'd even started. We discovered that there was no budget set aside for our work and no transport for us. We were only able to borrow the team car when nobody else needed it, which tended to be at weekends.

It then became evident that there were serious issues with using the house out in the village as a Cross of Nails centre. The cesspit did not have the capacity to cope with too many people. Only one toilet was in use and flushing had to be minimal. The heating in the place, especially the outbuildings, was not adequate. The well froze during severe Romanian winters so there was no water on site. Rats and mice moved in to the house with the autumn. And we discovered that the well was only a metre from the cesspit and downhill from it.

Of course we were not experts, so we needed to find some. When our civil engineer son-in-law came to us for Christmas that year, we took him out to the village and asked him to look at the building. He was very worried about it and said that in the west it would be condemned as unsafe. A few weeks later we met an American water engineer who looked at the cess and well system. 'There's one thing you learn as a water engineer,' he declared. 'Doo-doos always float downhill' – exactly our problem. The contents of the cesspit, soaking through the ground and going downhill, would contaminate the well water, if it had not done so already.

As we got to know people in Sibiu, it also became clear that many of them were working two or even three jobs just to make ends meet. It was highly unlikely that any of them would find the time to come out to the village for conferences and discussions.

The final nail in the coffin came when we discovered that the Lutheran church had built a very nice guest house just up the road in the same village, with none of our practical problems. It was well built and attractive, warm, with flushing loos, a resident housekeeper and staff. We would simply be trying to replicate badly what was already being done well in the same place.

By our first Christmas, it was clear that our whole *raison d'être* for being in Romania had collapsed. We had an unworkable project. It was

clearly not practicable to live in the village; not only were there all the basic problems with the house, but we needed to be based in Sibiu itself if we were to have any hope of meeting people and building relationships. Fr Vasile Mihoc came to our rescue with a flat which belonged to one of his church members. We agreed the rent with CMS, moved in, settled down and began to struggle with the language, but after the first Christmas we were at a very low ebb.

Everything had fractured around us. The disintegration of the project meant we were in no-man's-land. We had sold everything to come to Romania: we had nothing in the UK at all, no job, no home, no furniture, no car, almost no belongings. We had thoroughly burnt our boats, and now were surrounded by the wreckage of our new work. We were depressed, frustrated, miserable, and wholly confused. What was going on? What did God think he was doing?

Our CMS regional representative came out to see the situation for himself; he listened and we talked and prayed together, but he could come up with no alternative. We were stuck. We tried to make a number of things work: we asked Fr Vasile for something to do. He was a major leader in the organisation known as the Lord's Army, an evangelical movement started by an Orthodox priest in the 1930s, and Fr Vasile had been instrumental in building a centre for them in Sibiu. He was keen to use us but it was not clear to us how we could help, apart from teaching English to some of the Lord's Army members in the centre. During an early visit to his home we met one of his thirteen children, a very lively, highly intelligent girl called Dora who, at the age of fourteen, spoke English fluently. She begged me to go to her school and teach English with her teacher there.

I hesitated. We had very quickly discovered that many people wanted us to teach them English, but God had not taken us to Romania to do that. It was a distraction from our main purpose of developing the

reconciliation work. But with the collapse of that purpose, and the difficulty in constructing a new role for ourselves, I began to see it differently. 'Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might' (Ecclesiastes 9:10) became a guiding light during this struggle. English teaching was at hand. I had no idea how to do it, but I had an English degree and I could learn. I agreed to help Dora's teacher.

Apart from this and the language-learning, we followed up everything that came our way. Geoff in particular, as an Anglican priest, had entry everywhere and soon had friends in all the denominations in Sibiu. We got to know some of the Orthodox priests, especially those who could speak English. Our way forward thrived on Romanian friendliness and generosity. The Lutheran church was unfailingly welcoming and invited us to teach English in their little theological faculty in the city. One of the staff at the medical/social project we had joined introduced us to his brother, who was a Greek-Catholic (or Uniate) priest in a nearby village, and we visited him and his church. We got to know the Calvinist Hungarian pastor and his wife. The so-called neo-Protestants – Baptists, Brethren and Pentecostals – invited us to meals and to join their prayer meetings. Meeting with other missionary women for prayer on a regular basis became a spiritual lifeline for me.

Gradually, slowly, the fog surrounding us began to clear. We met an ecumenical group of students called 'Corpus Christi' who invited us to one of their conferences. We began to work with them, and discovered that they needed a centre to call their own, where they could organise get-togethers in order to improve mutual understanding between the denominations – the very purpose for which we had come to Romania ourselves. I came across a Baptist girl called Irina who had a heart for abortion education work, and I went with her to some of the local villages, learning of the abysmal ignorance which led

to Romania having the highest number of abortions in Europe. One woman said she had had eighteen abortions. Sibiu is a university town, and Irina formed a small team to take sex education into some of the student hostels too. This work was also in need of a base.

It looked more and more as if we could usefully create a centre in Sibiu, under the reconciliation umbrella of the Cross of Nails, used by Corpus Christi and by Irina's sex-education team *Darul Vieții* (the Gift of Life) for small conferences. As our own ideas became clearer, we planned to put on events to bring people of different denominations together, and I would have a base for the English classes I was always being asked for.

We were aware that the founders of the charity might find the move from their house in the village to a centre in the city difficult and troubling, but they turned out to be marvellously supportive. When the CMS regional team encouraged us to go ahead we began a hunt for the right site.

At first we hoped to find somewhere we could live ourselves, using one of the rooms for meetings and conferences. This would have meant paying only one rent, but it soon became clear that no such properties were available. After some false starts we found a flat with a couple of large rooms in the centre of Sibiu, within easy reach of all the churches, the theology faculties and the university. It could not have been better. We joined up with Corpus Christi and Irina and took the plunge.

What had happened to my diaconal vocation? I asked myself. It seemed to have sunk without trace. Would I emerge from my Romanian experience no longer certain of my ministry? We couldn't even attend services in English, never mind Anglican liturgies where I might take part as a deacon. The nearest – and only – Anglican church in the country was in Bucharest, two hundred miles away. We went to the churches of our friends, worshipping in Romanian in the Orthodox churches – but

not able to take Communion – and German with the Lutherans, although the Hungarian of the Calvinists defeated us despite their lovely pastor and his wife. The nearest I could get to being a deacon in a liturgy was if I sneaked up behind one of the Orthodox deacons, praying Vespers in the cathedral. Standing quietly behind him as he raised his orarion in prayer made me feel that I was participating in the universal diaconate of Christ.

If we wanted an Anglican service in English we did it ourselves, and that was one of the ways we fed ourselves spiritually. We had brought a chalice and paten with us, and when we couldn't face the thought of partially understood Romanian on a Sunday morning, we stayed at home and celebrated Communion in our flat. It was often a special experience for reasons I can't quite explain – luminous, somehow, with the presence of the Holy Spirit – and would leave us feeling strengthened, blessed and at peace for the week ahead no matter how many challenges it held. We also offered Anglican communion in English to the other English-speakers in the city.

Our circumstances were starting to make sense, but my question didn't go away. What was diaconal about it all? Learning Romanian? Teaching English? I had been given the opportunity to teach English literature at the university, which involved a huge amount of work and preparation: but did it fit in my vocation? What about organising meetings? Visiting people? Working on sex education? Where were the connections with my calling? In this sea of new experiences, were there any recognisable guiding lights that would assure me it had not disappeared into thin air?

Slowly I began to discern them. Enabling the sex education work was surely 'reaching into the forgotten corners of the world', helping people to understand what was happening to them, giving them something to hold on to, an alternative to the continuing ravaging of

their bodies because nobody had told them they had a choice other than numerous abortions. Irina and her team also reached Roma teenage girls who were often targeted for sexual services, instead offering them warmth, teaching and support.

Organising meetings and small conferences for all denominations was the best way we knew of bringing people together who had an historic mutual antipathy. We learned to provide ways of communication that would bring greater understanding, insisting on courtesy and respect instead of the anger and shouting that so often marked and marred exchanges between Orthodox and evangelical. The work of reconciliation offered a different pattern of exchange, one that was truer to God's kingdom. One day an Orthodox student paused in a debate that was becoming heated, and pointed to a text we had put up on the wall of our Cross of Nails centre: *Endeavour to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.* 'Do you believe that?' he asked the others, and the discussion calmed down. Surely this was in tune with the reconciliation that the Seven deacons in Acts 6 had been tasked with.

I finally began to see a purpose in the English teaching too. When some of the Orthodox theology students asked me to provide them with a class, I found an English course book that was specifically written for religious purposes. As we went through the exercises and role-plays together, sometimes the students would relax and open up in ways that I suspected were not possible elsewhere. The Orthodox faculty in Sibiu appeared strict and paternalistic. Discussion was not encouraged. I realised that our centre and our approach had become a safe place for them to raise doubts and fears, which they were allowed to express freely to someone who was not shocked and would not tell them off. To a degree, they trusted me.

As I listened to them, learning all the time, I discovered that there was little or no connection being made between theology and practice

in the colleges. Nobody seemed to do any application. It was all about head-knowledge, and if the students found something difficult or worrying they were often afraid to say so. Faculty staff had told us that they did not want their students mixing with other denominations, on the grounds that as they knew so little about their own Orthodox faith, they would be easily confused. They wanted the students to have a thorough theological grounding in Orthodoxy first before they were exposed to other understandings of the Christian faith.

This was fair enough, so I had to guard my tongue. The students' questions would sometimes provide a way forward. One day they expressed anxiety about the future of the church. They felt that most people in the Orthodox Church knew so little about their faith that the churches would be empty in a few years; those who were left would be the elderly, clinging on to a confusion of myth and folklore that they felt so often passed for faith. The students, most of whom would go on to be priests, had no idea how to tackle what they saw as a major crisis situation. How could they teach their people?

'Look around your churches,' I suggested on a sudden insight. They stared at me. 'What do you see?'

'Icons' was the answer. Wall paintings. Scenes from the life of Jesus. Christ Pantocrator. Christ the ruler of the universe. Rows of saints.

'Teach your people about the faith by using your own churches,' I went on. 'Tell them the parables and Bible stories that are illustrated on your walls. If you take just one icon each Sunday, and draw out the meaning, you will still not have reached the end of them all even after a year.'

It was a new approach for them. They only knew of sermons that were mainly scolds.

I thought no more about it, but a year or so later we held an event attended by some of these students, who had completed their degrees and were leaving the faculty. They came up to me afterwards.

'Thank you so much for your English lessons,' they began. 'We learned so much. We are still talking about some of the things you taught us there. It made us think, and it was very helpful.'

It's not always given to us to see some positive outcome for our work, but that was a special moment for me. God was showing me that my hidden ministry had value and was bearing fruit.

2005 began, when our first three years of service would be complete and we'd go home to England in the summer for a rest and to do deputation in our supporting churches. The surprises, however, were still coming.

We heard from CMS that they were about to withdraw funding from the Cross of Nails centre. Without it, the centre would close and we would be without a ministry. It came out of the blue and absolutely threw us. We would be going home after a tour which had seen the work fail not once, but twice.

We would have liked some warning and discussion, but there was nothing to be done. The mission was going through a very tight time financially and major changes were afoot. Once more, we were at a loss. We would go home, speak at lots of meetings, and search for another job – we had no idea what. We were back to prayer once more, with not a clue about the future, having to trust God again completely.

With all the practice we'd had, you'd think it would be easier. But it wasn't. We struggled with the situation, with ourselves, with the mission back home. And at the end of our three-year switchback ride, we were tired too.

What happened next was completely unforeseeable. Geoff had been invited to a Saturday evening meeting by a friend in the next-door Orthodox diocese, which had its archbishop's seat in the ancient city of Alba Iulia, about fifty miles from Sibiu. As he was chatting to people afterwards, an Orthodox priest came up to him. He was a lively man and Geoff felt able to be open with him and discuss the difficulties we were

experiencing in Sibiu.

At once Father Luka said, 'You should meet our archbishop. He would have you like a shot. I'll arrange an interview for you with him if you like.'

Geoff hesitated. Not everyone who offered to help us followed through – something we'd had to get used to. This seemed a major step which was being done hastily and without thought or preparation. Nothing ventured, nothing gained, however, so he said, 'If you organise an interview, I shall come and meet him.'

When he came home and told me about it we were of one mind: would this happen? We doubted it, but we offered it to God anyway.

The following evening the phone rang; Geoff answered and I listened in to the Romanian conversation. It was Fr Luka and he had been as good as his word. 'I've arranged for you to meet the archbishop tomorrow,' he said. 'His name is Andrei Andreicuț.'

We tried to find out something about the archbishop before we met him. We discovered some of our Orthodox student friends had been to the theology faculty in Alba Iulia and met him. 'It's a different world,' one of them told us.

'In what way? A good way?'

'A very good way. A wonderful way. The atmosphere in the faculty is so open. Everybody is so much more relaxed. The archbishop is a very special person.'

A week later, dressed in my best Romanian matron garb of a long-skirted suit, we were being shown into the study of the Archbishop of Alba Iulia.

He got up to greet us, a man with direct and shrewd blue eyes, in a black cassock, with a long grey beard and very quietly spoken. He ordered coffee in little china cups, and we sat down with him.

'Now, Father,' he said to Geoff without any preamble. 'What can

you tell us about how the Anglican Church in England deals with the problem of secularisation?'

No beating about the bush, which we fast discovered was typical. This archbishop was remarkable indeed. He had been a priest in the city of Turdu during communism, and had secretly – he thought – continued to teach young priests in defiance of the authorities. It was only after communism fell and the Securitate police files were made available, that he discovered there had been a hidden microphone in his apartment and, like thousands of others, he had been spied on.

When he became Archbishop in Alba Iulia he set about tackling the spiritual poverty left over by the harsh communist years. He built Archbishop's quarters behind the cathedral where he both lived and worked, including offices, staff quarters and a suite of rooms for the nuns who tended the cathedral. He began a radio station. He set up his own printing house and wrote books which explained the faith in simple terms for people. He appointed a youth minister. Each year he held an international symposium for scholars of different denominations to present papers on a given subject, always topical and relevant. His energy, focus and commitment were all the more striking in a church notably entrenched in its tradition.

We left his office with an invitation from him. Would we move to Alba Iulia and help him in his mission? He would like Geoff to do some teaching with his staff in the theological faculty, and would I please offer English lessons? He had staff who could not speak English and he wanted them to learn.

As easy as that. Surely there were some hitches – some unseen problems – something we hadn't noticed?

We contacted CMS. We had a whole new opportunity – what did they think? Would they support us if we moved to Alba Iulia and helped the archbishop with his mission?

The answer was positive, but we'd learned a few lessons the hard way. This time we asked for a proper contract which set out the terms of our work, which would need the agreement and signature of the archbishop and our CMS regional manager. And we asked our own Bishop of Coventry if he would be prepared to write to Archbishop Andrei and commend us to him. Writing bishop to bishop like this would avoid all the problems we had had with the Orthodox Church in Sibiu. It would make it clear we were not rogue ministers, as they feared, but were bona fide clergy in good standing with our bishop.

We drove the fifty miles from Alba Iulia to Sibiu full of high spirits and amazement. God had a plan already in place. Who would have known? – a plan not dependent on our efforts, but the fruit of building relationships and following leads in faith. So often, those paths had reached dead ends. Dared we trust that this one had a future?

There was just one problem left for us to tackle. What could we do about our Cross of Nails centre, soon to close? Was it just to be consigned to the file labelled 'failed projects'? Geoff especially grieved over the small library he was putting together of English theological books, available to the numerous students in Sibiu. There were no other theology books in English, but many of the students spoke English well and were eager for a wider view of theology to supplement what they learned in their faculties. If God had solved one problem so easily, surely this one was not beyond him?

Back in Sibiu we had previously met a young Swiss scholar, Dr Stefan Tobler. He was working with the Lutheran Church, and had just set up his postgraduate Institute for Ecumenical Research.[12] As Geoff and I talked and prayed, we thought we saw a light at the end of our tunnel. We asked to go and see him.

12 http://ecum.ro/

He showed us his classroom in his new Institute, where he was slowly building a small German library of theological books. The room was in a big building that had been an orphanage next to a small chapel, the Johanniskirche, all owned by the Lutheran Church, which they were developing in a number of imaginative ways. It was roomy and light and attractive. Stefan explained that his idea was for postgraduate students from different denominations to study with him, with the purpose of learning about each other's churches. He hoped it would lead to greater mutual understanding.

'We're working with students too,' we said. 'We also are working towards greater mutual understanding between the denominations. And we, too, are building a small library of theological books in English – there are no English resources in either the Lutheran or the Orthodox libraries.'

We looked at him and took a deep breath. 'The thing is that our project has run out of money and we have to close our Cross of Nails centre. What do you think about our joining forces? We would be very happy to donate you our library, and continue to add to it – if in turn you would be willing for us to use your classroom sometimes for discussions and events.'

Stefan didn't hesitate. 'That's a wonderful idea,' he said, in his excellent German-accented English. 'I will need to talk it through with my bishop, but I can't see any objection.'

I could feel a big silly smile starting on my face. Surely it couldn't be this easy?

But it was. Before long we had shifted our library of books to the Institute, and began to count Stefan as both a colleague and a friend. God was clearly in charge, had a plan, and was steering us in a definite direction.

Whenever I look back at this moment in our lives, it is always with incredulity, gratitude and joy. A few months later our own bishop, the Rt

Revd Colin Bennetts, then Bishop of Coventry, came out to Romania for an official presentation of the cross of nails to Stefan and his firmly founded ecumenical project for greater mutual understanding. Because Colin was coming, the Orthodox Archbishop of Sibiu, His Holiness Laurențiu Streza, also agreed to be at the ceremony – despite having told all his priests earlier that he would no longer attend ecumenical gatherings and they were not to do so either. The Lutheran Bishop of all Romania, of the Augsburg Confession, Christoph Klein, attended too. He had been an unfailing support to us throughout our ups and downs.

It fell to me to devise a liturgy. We were inviting our friends from all the confessions (denominations) to the presentation of the cross, which included people like the Baptists and the Greek-Catholics – who were anathema to the Orthodox.

I had begun my MPhil research by this time, so knew enough to be aware of where the sticking points were between the different confessions. I was also very conscious of Archbishop Laurențiu's objections to ecumenical worship, but realised why he held those views. With a lot of prayer I thought I could see a way forward.

The service had to be centred on the cross. That was the meaning of the whole project. I used scripture throughout, aware that this was safe ground for everyone. We asked a group of Orthodox students to come and sing Psalm 133: 'How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!' Members of each denomination contributed, and finally we came to the highlight not only of the whole service, but for the two of us, of our time in Sibiu. Bishop Colin presented the cross of nails to Stefan in the presence of all, the visible sign of a commitment to the denominations working together for greater mutual understanding.

Each bishop then stood up to say something, and my heart was in my mouth when it was the turn of the Orthodox archbishop who had said 'never again' to ecumenical worship. He said how glad he was to be

there. He said he particularly appreciated the liturgy, for two reasons: one was the centrality of the cross of Christ, and the other was the use of scripture. He had been very moved by it.

God had turned our mourning for our project into dancing, and my spirit still dances every time I think of that ceremony. I had been given a very special opportunity to make a diaconal contribution to reconciliation.

But perhaps it was just as well that the archbishop didn't know the liturgy had been written by a female Protestant deacon.

CHAPTER 9

THE ARCHBISHOP AND THE LORD'S ARMY

We were sitting in a small meeting room in Harghița county, with a group from the Lord's Army. It was another bitterly cold winter and the only heating was from a sorba, a traditional Romanian heater, in one corner. The sorba wasn't working properly and slowly filled the room with smoke. When we were all coughing, somebody would open a window for a while so that fresh, freezing air would gust in.

Nobody seemed bothered by this. It was all very good-natured. We sat there in our coats with our scarves and gloves. They were a lovely responsive group and engaged positively with what we were saying about doing mission in modern society.

We had started our second tour of service in Alba Iulia in the snowy January of 2006, and had picked up on the relationships we had already built with the Lord's Army. We had come across them even before we'd arrived in Romania. They are the evangelical wing of the Orthodox Church, committed to preaching scripturally and praying passionately. Under communism they had been persecuted, meeting outside in the woods at night to support each other. They had been very courageous, but it had left them with a fear of being spied on. They do not always feel they can trust the Orthodox Church, who look on them with suspicion and doubt their Orthodox credentials.

We could see why. The spirituality of the Lord's Army is much closer to the Baptists and Pentecostals. They take the Bible very seriously and mistrust the powerful tradition of the Orthodox Church, which has no time at all for those denominations they call neo-Protestants.

In our first tour in Sibiu we had met a young Lord's Army leader called Petru. He was full of enthusiasm, a gifted preacher and teacher, and keen to recruit us to help him with mission. He invited us to his yearly young people's camp, held in a basic hostel in the hills. We were lucky – we had a room to ourselves, whereas everyone else had to share in dormitories, and I learned to be one of the fifty girls using the one bathroom on our corridor, with its two cold showers (no shower curtains) and two loos – even though it meant getting up at 5am to have a shower.

The quality of the young leaders who worked with Petru was outstanding. They were incredibly gifted evangelists, preachers and teachers; as we listened to them, we wondered what on earth we could offer. Petru himself was a revelation: the young people were given a slot on the last afternoon when they were able to ask anything they wanted. They wrote their questions on slips of paper and put them anonymously in a box, and he would read and respond to them. In a religious culture where people were told what to think, and awkward questions were avoided, he thought he was probably the only person doing this at the time in the Orthodox Church and Lord's Army, seeking to connect the Christian faith with the nitty-gritty questions of life.

On the last evening there was always a bonfire, and we joined the teenagers on the side of the hill, sitting on the ground above the fire in the warm night. It was the final talk, the call to personal commitment to Christ, the highlight of the week. Geoff had been asked to give it.

He had spent time with one of the leaders, Viorel, earlier that afternoon. Viorel had just finished an English degree in Cluj, and agreed to translate for Geoff as our Romanian was still not as good as we'd hoped. So the two of them stood up in the growing darkness, back-lit by

the fire, Geoff white-haired and white-bearded, the older man in his fifties, and Viorel, young, in his twenties.

As Geoff spoke and Viorel translated, something special happened. It was not just one person speaking and the other interpreting. It became powerfully clear that here were two people totally at one in mind, heart and spirit, speaking almost from the same mouth, fired by the same God.

That experience is for ever lodged in my memory and my heart, still with power to this day to lift my spirits and remind me, like a brightly glowing flame, that God is at work in special ways. A number of young people made a commitment to Christ that evening, and the next day we listened and watched as they made their 'covenant' with God and with the Lord's Army.

Experiences never stay on the mountain-top, or on the hillside with a bonfire and two passionate evangelists. We had been to England for our six months of leave and deputation work, spending time with our children and my parents. They were still well, still willing for us to be away, so we had returned in the winter of 2005 to take up our new appointment in Alba Iulia.

Our work there had two streams: one was with the archbishop, based on his faculty of theology; and the other was with the Lord's Army largely through our continuing friendship with Petru and his lovely wife Ana. There was a big group of the Lord's Army meeting in Alba Iulia, where one of their leaders had given us no end of help as we searched for a flat to rent and a car to take us around. We began to attend their meetings.

By this time we'd grown used to the Lord's Army way of doing things, which was reminiscent of Brethren churches in the UK. Women would sit, mainly but not exclusively, on one side of the room and men on the other. Only men were allowed to preach. They had no training and most did little preparation: they simply stood up and shared their

thoughts about a Bible passage. We never knew how many of these there would be in a meeting. The Lord's Army has some very gifted preachers of whom they are justly proud, and boys from a young age are encouraged to stand up and share their thoughts with the meeting.

The women are allowed to sing and pray aloud. We were modestly dressed in long skirts with our heads covered. For a woman to stand up and pray with great emotion, and end in tears, is considered especially spiritual. Young people had their place, sitting in the front row, leading all the singing with keyboard and voice.

I began to ask myself my deacon's question. How could I serve this situation where the Lord had put me?

Small children came to the meeting but never had any teaching suitable for their age, so I did some exploration with the Lord's Army women and teenagers. I found some children's resources in Romanian and showed it to them, suggesting that we take the children into the annexe during the meeting and give them their own activity. What did they think about this idea?

'No need for it,' I was told bluntly. Although the children had nothing to do during meetings which lasted for two hours or more and they did run around a bit, they were very good and quiet which was all that was needed, they asserted.

I tried another tack. Would the children enjoy learning about God at their own level?

Well, they would give it a try, they agreed reluctantly. Clearly they didn't want to offend me.

Nothing daunted, I pressed on, offering ideas and resources. My *pièce de résistance* the following year was building an Easter garden with the kids during the adult meeting, telling them of Jesus' death and resurrection at the same time. They loved doing it, and I hoped I was smuggling in the idea that teaching didn't have to be lengthy, tedious and over their heads, but lively, fun and interactive.

Well, I could dream. And pray. Any illusions had by this time evaporated into thin air. Which is what illusions should do, but I was left with a conundrum. How could I offer these 'new' ideas when the Lord's Army so strongly resisted my methods – not to mention my gender?

Petru continued to be very keen to use both of us, and I'll always be grateful to him because he wanted me to have a voice despite the entrenched attitudes to women. He and Ana invited us for another weekend of mission.

Now when I was at home on leave I had decided to get organised. This time around we had a much better idea of what would be expected of us when we returned to Romania. We were both concerned about the introspection of the Lord's Army culture: the fear of those who did not belong to them; the anxiety that if their young people went to university they might lose their faith. Everything seemed very in-house, with even youngsters being expected to marry other Lord's Army members. I wanted to help the women see that the 'outside world' was not a world to be feared and held at arm's length, but the world God loved, with a crucial part for them to play in connecting neighbours and friends with that love. On leave in the UK I knew I might be given opportunities, on my return to Romania, to talk to women about mission and outreach, and I had come across a short publication by Ruth Adams and Jan Harney for Women's Christian Viewpoint, *Unlocking the Door.* I thought it would cross cultures very easily, so I brought it back with me and did a first translation with Romanian help. I tried it out with the Lord's Army women in Alba Iulia and refined it, so when I was asked to address the women in Petru and Ana's town, I decided to use it again.

To my surprise this idea didn't go down well. Petru and Ana were worried about people's response. I think they were concerned that my interactive approach, with small group discussion, would be too difficult. The Lord's Army only teaches by preaching. This was expected of me too.

Well, I was sorry, I said, but it was the only thing I had prepared, so would I be given permission to try it out? After all, the women were used to sitting through hours and hours of preaching – some of it very boring. Surely they had the stamina for this, which would be much shorter?

This was reluctantly agreed, which was very unusual. Normally Petru was remarkably positive about my contributions and continued to ask me for ideas even after we left Romania. He and Ana were clearly anxious, and when I stood up to give my presentation there were interruptions every few minutes so that the women could sing.

I struggled with my reaction as we walked home in the cold and dark after the meeting. It didn't help that my temperature had started to climb with the onset of flu.

We had a post-mortem in the living room while I nursed my cold with doses of traditional Romanian herbal tea.

It was not good.

Ana had asked some of the women what they had thought, and they disapproved. It wasn't what they were expecting. People hadn't liked it, Petru said, and I respected his judgement. I realised this was the end of my contribution, and began to think longingly of getting back to my own bed in Alba Iulia to nurse my flu.

Ana's mother happened to be staying with them on that visit. Petru was scanning my preparation for a second session, and as he discarded the pages, she began to pick them up and read them. Suddenly she sat up straight.

'This is *really good*,' she announced. 'It's so interesting. We women definitely need to hear this. It will help us so much.'

All at once I found myself surrounded by smiles and approval. If that was the case, then of course I must give my second presentation, said Petru.

I discovered I was feeling a lot more feverish than I thought.

At the same time, we were getting used to our new situation in Alba Iulia. From the start Geoff got on really well with Archbishop Andrei, who showed astonishing confidence in him, allowing him not only to sit in on lectures with his staff in the theological faculty, but often to teach as well – something that would never have happened in Sibiu. It was a very privileged position, putting him at the heart of faculty life. He was able to share theological approaches for understanding the increasingly secular society we all found ourselves inhabiting, and addressing the anxiety felt by the staff.

After so many years in mission, we had learned to be adaptable. Each year the archbishop held an international symposium on a subject that was relevant to the modern church. The symposium consisted of paper after paper, some with translation, which made them twice as long. That year the theme was the effect of secularisation on the church.

Geoff had been asked to give a paper. As it was 5pm by the time it was his turn, and people had been sitting patiently listening all day, he decided that presentation was everything. He mounted the podium and held up a hastily-made visual, a piece of paper that just said DUMNEZEU (GOD). Nobody ever used visuals, so there was a stir of interest, and the archbishop grinned. After ten minutes, Geoff sat down. He had said all he wanted to say in his normal lively manner, and it was clear from the response that his contribution would not be forgotten quickly.

Producing impromptu talks became something of a habit. A couple from England came to stay over our first Easter in Alba Iulia. The service of Easter light had begun the night before, and many people, including the archbishop and his priests, had been up most of the night. This was followed the next day by an open-air service of celebration, with a platform erected at the cathedral door. Geoff as usual was invited to robe and join the priests and processed in with them, while I and my friends – one a fellow deacon – watched from the portico just behind the platform.

We looked out on a lovely sunny morning. Spring flowers had been planted in the cathedral grounds, which was thronged with thousands of standing worshippers. We had it easy this time: there were chairs for us on the portico – normally we stood, with everyone else – and we found ourselves side by side with the cathedral choir.

It was beautiful. Again and again, led by the choir, we sang

Hristos a înviat din morți/ Cu moartea pe moarte călcând/ Şi celor din morminte/ Viață dăruindu-le!
Christ has risen from the dead,
by death trampling death,
and giving life to those from the grave!

Halfway through the service Geoff turned and mouthed *'Pray for me!'* We had seen one of the priests go up to him and whisper, and a few minutes later he was ushered to the front of the platform, and began to speak. The archbishop had asked him to say a few words. No time for preparation. No time for thought. No time even to check if his Romanian was correct. Under that pressure, Geoff suddenly remembered something he had come across on Facebook the previous week. An African pastor had given a talk in which he said that usually, if something was empty, it was bad news. Empty pockets – empty bank account – empty cupboard. But, he said, Easter told us of an empty tomb – an emptiness which was good news. Geoff preached it in Romanian.

His talk went out with the rest of the service on the radio station, and some years later people were still quoting it to him. Another example of the Holy Spirit coming to our rescue.

For my own part, as well as trying to help in the Lord's Army, I had started English classes in the theology faculty as the archbishop had asked. When I saw that these were not going to fill my time sufficiently,

I took myself off to the English faculty in the nearby University of Alba Iulia, and offered my services there too.

Our first tour had taught me to stop being purist about what I did. The verse which had come to my rescue reappeared in my mind: 'whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might'. Stop fretting, and just take the opportunities that come to serve the needs people felt. I'd already discovered that this could build relationships and trust which were the basis for everything else.

A year later came news which put an end to our time in Romania. My father had been diagnosed with advanced prostate cancer, and had been given three months to live.

We notified the mission and began to plan our packing, but we still had some busy and demanding weeks before we could leave.

CHAPTER 10

FIGHT TO THE FINISH

I took an A4 pad of paper and sat down with Geoff in the living room in our Alba Iulia flat to organise ourselves.

'Number one. We've got the Lord's Army youth camp and we've given ourselves a lot to do there,' I said.

'What stage is your booklet at?'

I'd spent a great deal of time refining my work on practical ways of reaching others with the Christian faith. Several translations later, it was ready to be published by a Lord's Army printer, who had refused to do so. Why? The usual reason – because I was female, although he would not say so. It had been a long shot and I was not surprised to be refused.

'What would you think about going back to the publisher with your name on the cover instead of mine?' I asked Geoff, swallowing my pride. After all, it was my work.

'Absolutely not. You've done it all. Why should I take the credit?'

'Because it would be more useful to the Lord's Army if you did?'

'I'm not sure that we could persuade the publisher, even then. And it would take months. We need it for the camp – we can't afford to wait.'

'Let's print it off ourselves. A hundred copies,' I suggested. Eventually *Pescari de Suflete: Evanghelizarea în Lumea de Astăzi (Fishers of Souls: Evangelisation in Today's World)* rolled off our printer, to be collated and stapled, ready for use at the camp.

'What about this Orthodox priest?' I asked. With Petru's approval, we had invited an Orthodox priest from Scandinavia with a ministry

amongst the homeless to come as a guest to the Lord's Army youth camp.

'I think most of the travel and accommodation arrangements are sorted. Let's hope he can inspire the young leaders. At present most of them are deeply disillusioned with the Orthodox Church, even though the Lord's Army claims to be Orthodox.'

'Hopefully Father Anthony can persuade them that it's possible to find ways of being evangelistic inside the Orthodox Church.'

'If only the Lord's Army would consider the possibility!' Geoff lamented. 'The Orthodox Church needs their energy, commitment and passion!'

All we could do was try. However, we could not have foreseen the outcome.

We collected Fr Anthony from the airport and took him to meet the Archbishop of Alba Iulia, who had invited him to stay as his guest. Then we all went off to the camp, where we introduced the visitor to the Lord's Army leadership and the young people who were there.

At first everything went brilliantly. Fr Anthony told some vivid stories of his work. Great, we thought. He's connecting Orthodoxy with evangelism, so important to the Lord's Army, which is exactly what we'd hoped.

Later on in the week we were sitting in the dining room while the young people were acting out a drama. Coffee and tea were on the go and I offered to fetch some for Anthony. I was concerned when I brought him his cup – his hands were shaking so violently he couldn't hold it, and he got me to set it down on the floor.

That was the first clue.

After the camp, the three of us returned to Alba Iulia. We offloaded Anthony at the archbishop's guest house and went back to our flat, looking forward to a night's sleep in our own bed.

Very early the next day the phone rang.

'Please come to the guest house,' said a priest's voice. 'We're having trouble with your friend.'

Geoff threw on some clothes and rushed off. When he arrived, he found Anthony on the floor, with a very large Orthodox priest sitting on him.

Bit by bit he pieced the story together. After everyone had gone to bed the previous night, Anthony had gone into the kitchen and found a jug of local țuică, a Romanian spirit which can be 65 per cent alcohol. He had drunk it all and started to behave bizarrely, turning violent when approached.

Geoff got the big priest off him, sat him in a chair, asked for coffee for him and calmed him down. Then we sent for an American Orthodox friend working with addicts in a nearby city. By this time there was no doubt that Anthony was an alcoholic. The teetotal culture of the Lord's Army camp had forced him into withdrawal and resulted in delirium tremens, and his symptoms were enormously exacerbated by his sudden return to far too much alcohol.

Chuck, our American Orthodox friend, was brilliant with him, knowing just what to say and do. He was, he explained, a recovering alcoholic himself. He spent a long time with Fr Anthony and afterwards gave us some professional advice.

As a result we got Anthony a companion to go with him on the plane as far as Frankfurt and we breathed a sigh of relief as we saw the plane take off. He was still slightly confused, and we wanted to be sure he would be looked after and assisted to find the right connection. But we were also really puzzled. How come his sending church had never realised that he had this major problem? If they had, they surely wouldn't have recommended him to us. After a lot of thought and prayer and anxiety about the outcome, we got in touch with his boss and told him about it.

'Oh dear. I thought all that was behind him. Thank you for looking after him. We'll meet him at the airport and talk to him.'

Anthony was sent to a clinic, and we received an enraged letter from his wife, reproaching us for ruining his ministry by exposing his problem to the church authorities. It was clear that the two of them had developed a complex co-dependency, with Anthony's wife determined to hide his addiction from others so that he could continue with his work.

I didn't understand it at all. Wouldn't a wife want her husband to get treatment? It was an insight into one of the ways we deceive ourselves as well as those around us, and how we can distort the importance of our ministry to the detriment of our well-being.

But it was worse than that.

'The Lord's Army will never trust us again,' I said to Geoff.

'No. They are firmly teetotal. We brought along someone who has confirmed all their worst fears about the Orthodox Church and its priests.'

'They're such a tight-knit group. This news is spreading like wildfire. Anthony has just shipwrecked all the work we've done and the trust we've built up over the past few years.'

'In one fell swoop.'

'Perhaps it's just as well we're going home,' I said sadly. It was the worst possible outcome, and it was something we could only commit to God's mercy and wisdom.

All of that had been number one on our list when we sat together doing our advance planning. Next was the holiday Bible club in Sibiu, which was to take place almost immediately after the Lord's Army camp. We were both very excited about this.

One of our friends, a senior Orthodox priest in Sibiu, had agreed to host an Anglican holiday Bible club in his church and his

parish school. To the best of our knowledge this had never been done before. Vacation Bible schools were run all over Romania by teams coming from the States as well as the UK, based on independent churches like the Baptists and inevitably in an Orthodox parish. It caused enormous anger among the Orthodox, who considered that these interlopers were trying to steal their congregation.

We knew the very person to lead an Anglican team: Keith Parr, youth minister at Coventry Cathedral, one of our supporting churches. We also knew the very priest to approach to host it. Father Mihai was an older man, an Archbishop's Councillor, whose warmth and friendliness had always made us feel at home. He was open-minded and ready to try something risky.

Learning from the past, this time we determined to meet Orthodox criteria. We collected from Keith an outline of what he wanted to teach and took it to Archbishop Laurențiu Streza in Sibiu. He had been at the presentation of the Cross of Nails, knew us from the past and had met our bishop from Coventry. We had a good relationship with him already, but we knew we could not take anything for granted. He had to check that Keith's teaching did not conflict in any way with Orthodox doctrine.

Keith had taken the fruits of the Holy Spirit as his theme. We had translated his notes and handed them over to the archbishop, then watched him anxiously. He was an imposing man in his black cassock, with heavy dark brows and an uncompromising expression. He ran his eye over the pages, and only a minute later scribbled his signature on them.

We had our go-ahead. We felt like high-fiving, or punching the air, or doing a dance, or all three. Instead, we thanked him nicely and went off for a celebratory cup of coffee. We would be breaking new ground in reconciliation work, showing in deed as well as in word that it was

possible for the denominations to work together to God's glory and the good of people's faith, and although there was still a hill to climb, we took a moment to share the joy, and to think back over the disastrous time when we had been to see the previous bishop who had all but thrown us out. Sometimes we try and do the right thing at the wrong time, or with the wrong people. Learning from our mistakes was key, and now in God's good time it had paid off.

Keith and his youth team flew to Sibiu and began a well-organised programme with the children in the local school building and Romanian teenagers translating for him. We started in Mihai's church with a short service of prayer and a blessing from him, then continued with activities and games for the week. On the last day we discovered to our surprise that word had got around about what we were doing, and we had a number of visitors to see what was going on, including the county Education Adviser. They watched as Keith played his pink guitar and the children jumped up and down to the songs, which had been translated for them. They admired the artwork. They observed the interactive nature of the teaching (not something which often happens in conservative Romanian schools), and some of them joined us for our final service of thanksgiving, with presentation by the children, in Fr Mihai's church.

The observers loved it. Could Keith come and do it all again – only this time in schools all over the county?

Our very chequered career in Romania would finish on a high, but we did not know that at our planning meeting. We arrived at number three on my list.

'How did your phone call to the archdeacon go?' I asked.

With our time in Romania ending, we had to find a job for when we returned to the UK. Geoff would have four years before retirement, so it would be our final parish. I had been scouring the internet and the

church newspaper vacancies online for weeks.

One day Geoff had come indoors to hear me laughing.

'What is it?'

'I've found the perfect parish,' I said, mopping streaming eyes and trying to control myself. 'It's inner-city Birmingham. It's a church that seats a thousand people. It has a congregation of thirty. Just up our street!'

Geoff looked at me as if I were mad, but eventually we came to a common mind. On a trip home we met the archdeacon, saw the house and church, talked to the churchwardens, and formally applied.

'Yup,' Geoff replied. 'He says yes. We start at Bishop Latimer Church in Winson Green this autumn – first, they need to renovate the vicarage, and then our licensing will be arranged.'

'It's so strange. Never before in our lives have we known where we were going, so far in advance!'

I went back to my pad of paper where I was scribbling notes.

'Last but not least, we need to be getting rid of our stuff, packing what we want to keep, and arranging transport back to England.'

'And this time,' Geoff said firmly, 'we are not taking any recommendations for rascally friends of friends offering us a good transport deal!' We'd made the mistake of doing that when we went out to Romania, and two of our boxes never arrived with the loss of some vestments, including the stole my parents had given me for my ordination. That was the only thing I really minded about.

All in all this last task was the most complicated. Friends took some of our furniture, and the rest we gave to Father Simion in Sibiu, for use with his social project with Roma children and with the elderly. His wife was delighted with my fake fur winter coat: she would move the buttons, she said, being a little larger than me, and it would keep her warm.

The goods we were taking with us, we discovered at the last minute,

had to be transported somehow out to the bypass where the removals lorry could load them up. There was no way it could come into the city.

What a palaver.

Weeks later, exhausted by events and by the crises that had arisen, all the work, the heat of the summer, as well as the emotional wrench of having to say goodbye to so many dear friends, we landed in England. We were more than ready for a rest before settling in to Winson Green.

CHAPTER 11

FAMILY TROUBLES

It happened again. Once more we would have to park ourselves in temporary housing until the work on the vicarage was complete. The archdeacon was very supportive, driving us round parts of Birmingham, remarking that there were 'more trees than people'. He also said that it was nice that I was a deacon, but that I needed to be clear from the start that there would be no money to pay me. I knew that anyway – there was only one salaried post available. I heaved an inward sigh. 'Twas ever thus.

So we found ourselves in a Methodist student hostel in Selly Oak, sleeping, eating and studying in one room, with a shared kitchen on the other side of the corridor. We were, we decided, getting a little old for student living.

We couldn't be idle. There was furniture to buy for the big Edwardian vicarage, mainly second-hand from the British Heart Foundation, as well as needing to be on hand for the workmen in the vicarage to consult. We were still part of CMS and had a deputation schedule to fulfil to all our supporting churches. We finalised our presentation and started travelling near and far, meeting house groups, having working meals, and speaking at church services.

While we were in the middle of this, one day the phone rang. It was our eldest daughter, who was living and working in Vietnam with her husband and toddler daughter. She sounded desperate. I could hear she was having to remind herself to breathe. She couldn't, she said, take any more.

We knew she and her husband had had continual problems in their marriage from the start. We also knew that she had done everything she could think of to try and fix things. We had been to stay with them several times, and they with us. We could see that there was no improvement. Vietnam was supposed to be a fresh start for them both, but nothing, it seemed, would stop his womanising.

In the middle of one night, she packed a bag, picked up her little daughter Naomi and went to the airport.

We met them at Birmingham International as they came through the exit, the strain evident on our daughter's face. The warden of the student flats found them temporary housing, and then they moved in with us to the completed vicarage.

I find I cannot write about the traumatic months that followed. Lear's daughter, Cordelia, says it for me: 'I cannot heave/ My heart into my mouth'. Even now, twelve years later, my stomach knots when I think about it.

I cannot possibly imagine what our daughter went through. I only know that it swept over Geoff and me in a tidal wave of distress. I am not accustomed to crying, but the days I wept turned into weeks. I slept less and less, and the energy drained out of us both. In the end Geoff contacted the archdeacon and explained the situation to him.

'I'm so sorry,' he said to him. 'These opening months are crucial in a parish and Gill and I had so many plans. But we find ourselves in a state of complete exhaustion.'

The archdeacon could not have been more supportive or understanding. 'Take as much time as you need,' he said.

That was a relief, but there was no point in feeling sorry for ourselves. We wanted to provide a safe and secure environment in which we could give our little granddaughter, as well as our daughter, the love and support they needed. The vicarage was so large that they could each have their own room and Naomi a permanent play area. The

rest of the time, we and our daughter went through everything together as we ferried her around, looked after Naomi while she saw lawyers, and on one awful occasion, met up with her ex-husband in the city centre.

Ministry? What ministry? I asked the Lord one day as I was taking clothes out of the dryer and folding them. This isn't what I planned. I had so much vision for my role in the parish, and now there was no chance of getting anywhere near it. My heart and mind were focused on our family and there was nothing left over for ministry.

Not for the first time, words came into my mind.

This is what I'm giving you to do. This. Now. Folding clothes. Looking after your family. Don't worry about the rest.

I needed to hear that, because I was also trying to look after my parents as best I could. I was dealing with their trials and challenges in Wiltshire long-distance by phone and email from Birmingham. When my father had first been diagnosed with prostate cancer his PSA had measured 3,000, with the cancer spreading everywhere, which was why he had been given only three months to live. The doctors had put him on hormone treatment, and over the next few months we witnessed a miracle of modern medicine, as the PSA began to drop like a stone until it was in the teens. Dad grew better and stronger, ever-ready to try new things and make the most of the life he had left.

Sadly, it had the opposite effect on my mother. She had always dreaded Dad dying before her, and being left on her own. She became very depressed and played Russian roulette with her medication, erratically taking only the pills she felt like.

After a long campaign I managed to persuade her to accept some help with cleaning the house, as she was almost blind with macular degeneration, and although she was doing the best she could, she missed what was needed and that upset her. She'd always been a superb and meticulous housewife and taken great pride in the way she kept all their different homes. Now Mandy came into their lives and Mum grew

to adore her. Then one night Mum fell down the stairs and broke her wrist. She was taken to hospital and the staff would not release her until there was more support in place. I found a male carer who had previously looked after our churchwarden's father, and, with Dad's agreement, was prepared to live in, sharing their care with Mandy.

Mum was furious to begin with, being an immensely private person, but Roger made a huge difference to their lives. He was an extremely good cook and persuaded Mum to eat healthy meals regularly. He also stood over her and insisted she took her medication. Mum loathed him for it, but she gradually grew better and more cheerful, much more the mother we remembered. Dad in his turn became deeply grateful to Roger, crediting him with 'giving my wife back to me'.

Then one day Roger called me to say Mum had gone into hospital. She'd had difficulty with her breathing – but we weren't to worry. It didn't appear to be anything very serious and the paramedics had been reassuring. Even so, Geoff and I cancelled everything and set off straightaway, arriving at Bath Royal Infirmary in the early afternoon.

Mum was wearing an oxygen mask and had a drain to clear her lungs. She had no idea who I was and she alternated between dozing, looking dazed and fighting with her mask. Two hours later she had stabilised and was allowed to take her mask off. She looked at me with great surprise and said, 'Oh! Are you here? I didn't know you were here.' I hugged and kissed her and she talked rationally for a while. I managed to feed her some ice cream, she had a drink and we said a prayer together. Then she deteriorated, she lost who I was and had to have the oxygen mask again.

I didn't know what to do for the best. We had not seen Dad yet and we knew he was frantic with worry. We had phoned him a couple of times but he needed to see us and hear from us first-hand. Mum was dozing, and the nursing staff assured me that she was improving, her lungs were clearer, and they recommended us to leave.

I hated leaving her like that. I wanted to be with her all the time, but Dad needed us too. We went, feeling torn.

We had supper with Dad and Roger, reassuring Dad as much as possible. Then we left to spend the night with some friends living nearby as there was no free bedroom for us in the house.

At 1am my phone rang. The nursing sister told me, kindly, that she was sorry but my mother had passed away, twenty minutes ago.

At first I didn't believe her. 'But I was only with her a few hours ago – and she was getting better!'

'I'm so sorry.'

So it was that we found ourselves, at 4am, pushing Dad in his wheelchair through the darkened car park to a dimly lit side-entrance to the hospital. We were taken to the ward where Mum had died, a different one from where I'd seen her. There was a sickening jolt in my stomach when I saw curtains round one of the beds. We pushed Dad inside.

Mum was lying on her back. We kissed her tenderly and left Dad to have a few minutes on his own. I could hear his voice as he talked to her, but stood far enough away not to hear what he said. It was his private moment of grief and loss. They had celebrated their diamond wedding only three weeks previously.

We went inside the curtains again when he called us, and prayed round her body. Then we took Dad home and I cradled him in my arms as he wept bitterly. My strong father. Always there for us. Never showing emotional need. It was a strange, strange reversal of roles.

I was close to my mother and we always had a warm and affectionate relationship. She and Dad had been marvellously supportive of our family when we had first come home from Nigeria, which we shall never forget. But I did not have much chance to mourn her because Dad now needed all my attention and support. He was nearly deaf and almost blind on top of the cancer.

I stayed with him and we planned Mum's funeral together. Then my

younger brother took over until Dad said he wanted to try being on his own. I made up my mind I would go and see him every month, and those were precious times. Gradually his medication failed and became only palliative. He was much less mobile and in more pain than he admitted. I would go and sit on a little stool by the side of his electronic chair and hold his hand. We didn't need to say or do anything. We were content just to be together. In the evenings we would say Compline, using the traditional form of words which he knew by heart. I look back now, and am so thankful that I had that time with him.

Roger and Mandy went on supporting him, taking him out, encouraging him to have friends round and cooking for them. There were problems – big ones – but I'll always be grateful for the way they cared for and loved him, even organising a ninetieth birthday bash for his neighbours.

My sister and I booked a meal at his favourite restaurant and he had a second birthday party with all the family. Dad was an extrovert, a party person, and he absolutely loved all of it. With treatment failing he was now skeletal, but he rose to his feet and gave a lively speech, without notes and without any hesitations, at the end of the meal.

March, 2010. I was staying with our youngest daughter and her husband in Bristol. Juliet had had a very long and arduous labour with her first baby, and I was there to look after them as they came home from hospital. She staggered in through the front door, looking white and exhausted, and went straight to bed.

I was still there as Holy Week began, and Geoff drove from Birmingham to pick me up from Bristol and take me to Melksham. Dad was very feeble now. He had a hospital bed downstairs in his house and needed more intensive care. Roger, his carer, was off work that week and my sister had moved in and was taking care of Dad with Mandy. Dad was barely audible, but he knew what was going on and who was there.

By Good Friday all my siblings were together around his bed. The vicar from Dad's previous church arrived to give him his final Communion. Although Dad could not swallow he would have known the taste of the wafer dipped in wine on his tongue. We sat with him, holding his hands, waiting. At one point my younger brother said, 'It's OK, Dad. Everything's in hand. You can go now.' I don't know if Dad could hear him or not.

Mandy came in and watched him. I saw the pulse in his neck fail, but she waited. It began to beat again, then stopped once more. This time it was final.

THE ABSENCE

A lament for my father

It's a great age to go, they say.
He had a wonderful life, they say.
He was full of faith, they say. Ready to meet his Maker.
He doesn't suffer any more, they say.
Maybe he's with your mum, they say.
How good you were all there, they say.
He's now at peace, they say.
We're sorry to hear.

So kind.

I only know
that the pitiless banshee of death
has screamed across my life
in malignant murderous greed
clawing out that strong and tall old tree
ripping savagely away its rooted living hold,
and leaving in my soul
a ragged, crying crater
whose voracious mouth has swallowed
my child's joy.

CHAPTER 12

LEARNING ALL THE TIME

Dad's death affected me in odd ways. I had been working on my research degree, the MPhil I had started in Romania. My tutors had been trying to persuade me to change to a PhD, and I had been dithering for months. Now my mind suddenly cleared. No, I said. I didn't want to go ahead with a PhD. I would stick with the MPhil.

There were other symptoms too, but life was moving on, as it always does. Naomi started nursery school. Hannah decided to retrain as a secondary teacher, so that she could be free during the school holidays with Naomi, and they stayed with us a second year. I continued with my research and began to act as a diocesan vocations adviser for people investigating a diaconal vocation.

By now I had become very involved with Bishop Latimer church. I steered the way to a simple refurbishment of the Lady Chapel in that great big cold church, so that we could use it for the children's Rainbow Church which I had started on Sundays. We were getting to know our neighbourhood: people living in poverty, with major social problems, and often chaotic lives. The streets where we lived were frequently fly-tipped, and we wanted to lift our neighbours' spirits and encourage them to take care of their environment. I sourced a grant, and bought compost, baskets and flowers from a local nursery, so that people could make their own hanging baskets. Our churchwarden went with some of them to put up hangers outside their houses for the baskets, and it

cheered the streets a little. It went well so I did the same thing at Christmas, this time for people to make wreaths for their front doors.

It was a way of saying to our neighbours that we wanted to give them something. We didn't want anything from them. When prayer-walking the locality one day I looked back at our big church tower that dominated the area, and had a strange awareness that our church should be seen like a mother to the parish, somewhere people could go and find kindness, acceptance and support. By this time we had a new colleague, a community minister from the United Reformed denomination with which we shared our church building. It was a joy working with Adella as the three of us found ourselves of one mind in so many ways.

I suggested that we prayer-walk the nearby streets after our staff meetings. I put together a simple card to explain that we were praying for that street that day, and then we walked and prayed in silence, popping the cards through letter boxes.

We were very surprised at some of the reactions. Sometimes a door would open immediately. Here was a young mum with three active children who had wanted to come to church for a long time but never found her way there. She started to attend. There was another young mum who would like her girls baptised. One day a Sikh opened the door and asked for prayer as he had just come out of hospital.

We wanted to be wise about what we did as many of our local streets were mainly Muslim. We need not have worried. Even Muslim shopkeepers would beam when I proffered the card, were delighted that we were praying for them, and offered to keep the card on the counter. The Muslim tailor who lived opposite us was always warm and friendly, and during the 2011 riots in Winson Green displayed a poster asking for prayers for peace, identical to the one we had put on the church notice board.

If there is one thing I've learnt over and over again, it is that building good relationships with people is key. Without them we are simply skating over a surface, making unwarranted assumptions, more interested perhaps in outcomes than in human beings, in danger of pandering to our own egos and our own agendas.

With this very much in mind, I continued to activate my diaconal muscle: there were people in the church who had never had any higher education, felt they couldn't do anything and who had no confidence at all. I managed to persuade some of them to do diocesan training courses: one completed the course for a children's church teacher, the first diploma she had ever had. Others became worship leaders and one woman started training to be a reader. Enabling others is deep in diaconal DNA and it was such a joy to see them surprised by their own ability and success.

Along with these sparks of light there was the gloomy prospect of the church building itself. It was not fit for purpose, would require squillions of pounds to make it so, and had already run through most of its historic assets before we arrived. *What to do with the church* meant endless meetings and reports and was on our agenda to the day we left. We had a good relationship with the local Seventh Day Adventist pastor, and discovered that his church wanted to rent it from the diocese. They were a big denomination with no building of their own in Birmingham, and Bishop Latimer was ideal for them. Our own little congregation moved into the redecorated and newly heated hall.

Life was never dull in Winson Green. We had been warned at the beginning by a senior cleric that weddings in the area were unlike any we had ever done before, and we soon discovered why: a number of people were getting married with the sole intention of being able to stay in the country, and we had to insist on seeing proper legal documentation of their identity and address. In the end Geoff sent all the couples to the

diocesan registrar where they had to swear an affidavit. That way, if things went pear-shaped, we were legally covered: or so we thought, until the day the Home Office phoned and asked about a bridegroom. He had presented all the correct documentation ahead of the wedding to prove his identity. She had only just discovered he had eight different passports.

Then there was the couple who wanted to get married and turned up with a baby. Geoff asked them about each other and they couldn't answer the questions. They told him when they had met – but the age of the baby proved it a lie. That was one wedding which didn't go ahead.

Another was a delightful guy in his eighties who wanted to marry his much younger carer. They were checked out thoroughly, it all seemed OK and the wedding day was set.

The evening before the wedding, the adult children of the groom arrived at the vicarage and demanded that it was stopped. Geoff told them they were talking to the wrong person – they should be talking to their dad. Next day, the bride's brother arrived at the church, preparing to phone the bride to tell her to come once the groom was in the building.

He was an hour late. Dressed in a white suit, he arrived by bus, having been locked into his house by his family. He had had to call the police to release him, while his family went to the reception venue where they overturned the reception tables, one of which fell on a child who had to be taken to hospital for treatment.

The groom said to Geoff, 'Vicar, can I cancel my wedding?'

'Only if you go to the church and personally tell your guests.'

The brother of the bride got on the phone. 'Sis, take off your wedding dress – there ain't gonna be no wedding today.' It was all very sad and emotional, and later they decided they couldn't get married with so much family opposition.

Meanwhile, the local police, always incredibly supportive, sat quietly outside in their car in the road, having been tipped off by us that there might be public disorder.

We got to know the police well, especially after they had chased a criminal through our garden. They were busy in our area: there was the house on the street opposite which caught fire from the heat of the lamps in the roof where cannabis was growing. That was after we found discarded hypodermic needles around the church, drug exchanges going down outside the vicarage, and 'gentlemen of the road' who had decided that the vicar and his wife were an excellent source of sandwiches and tea. Not to mention the people next door who claimed the church, the vicarage and the glebe land belonged to them. Their father had built it, they announced: which would have been difficult, as they were Edwardian buildings, long before their father was alive. In a great hurry the diocese registered its own ownership of the land.

Family life changed. Hannah graduated with her teaching diploma, moved out and started work. We still saw them a fair bit but she needed her own place and her independence. I began to recover from the deaths of my parents. In 2011, four years after moving to Winson Green, I completed my studies and was awarded my MPhil by Nottingham University. At long last, life was looking up.

Or so we thought. July 2011 was when Geoff and I celebrated our ruby wedding, and a month later our second daughter told us that she and her husband of fourteen years were splitting up. Geoff and I were on holiday in Dumfries, and spent our first Sunday there walking round and round a football pitch: he on the phone to our son-in-law, and I on my mobile to our daughter. It wasn't a great start to our break, and the weather matched our mood: the tail end of Hurricane Irene lashed Scotland and it poured with rain every day.

After her husband had moved out we went south to help our

daughter move house: in one weekend she and Geoff built all the IKEA furniture she needed while I started unpacking boxes, set up the kitchen, went shopping and made sure the bedroom for her two little children was ready for them when they came to their new house. It was the first of many journeys to help her with our grandchildren. It's hard, hard work, being a single working mum.

In 2012 Geoff turned sixty-six and we retired. The five fascinating but punishing years in Winson Green were having an effect on his health, and stopping became a necessity. We moved to a flat in Devon and took a decision not to get involved in anything – church or otherwise – for at least six months. We needed a rest.

I had mixed feelings about our time in Winson Green for my own ministry. I felt dissatisfied, unfulfilled: it hadn't been a 'proper' recognised ministry. I had only been able to look around and see what I could do to be useful, and it wasn't as much as I'd hoped for or wanted.

But deacons, too, have to mourn when they are bereaved, and cope as best they can with family traumas. In the end, we are only and entirely people whom God loves, who teaches us resilience, who guides us with his wisdom, who comforts us in our sorrows.

CHAPTER 13

RETIREMENT – BUT NOT REST

Our new surroundings were and are beautiful and greatly healing. We managed to co-own a small flat with the Church Pensions Board, which meant we could live by the sea. I had been brought up on the tiny island of Tristan da Cunha in the middle of the South Atlantic Ocean, and it had always been a dream to live near the sea again. Walking along the coast was balm to the wounds we had sustained, and God blessed us in ways we had never experienced before. It was odd, and new, to learn to receive from him instead of rushing around serving him, sometimes in an anxious way. We are still not very good at opening our hearts to his gifts, but we're learning.

At some point in those initial few months I discovered that the Diocesan Director of Ordinands was a woman I had trained with at Oak Hill. I got in touch with her to say hi and offer informal help with diaconal vocations. She replied with a cheery note, and I vaguely assumed that I might be asked to see the occasional diaconal enquirer, as I had in Birmingham.

Not long afterwards I had another email, this time from the Archdeacon of Exeter. He looked after the distinctive deacons in the diocese, had heard of my arrival and would like to meet me. That's nice and friendly, I thought. I duly went into Exeter on the train and found my way to the right room in the right building round the back of the cathedral. David greeted me warmly and served coffee.

As I was enjoying it, he outlined the situation in Exeter. The previous bishop, Michael Langrish, had been very keen on the diaconate and had created a college (or formal diocesan group) of deacons which met two or three times a year. 'This is good,' I said. 'I'm delighted you have sufficient deacons to make a college.'

'Thing is,' he went on, 'I'm retiring next year and I'm wondering whether you'd like to take this over from me.'

I didn't quite choke over my coffee. This was the last thing I expected. Me? Take over the deacons' work from the archdeacon? But what about being retired . . . and not having responsibilities . . . and . . . I couldn't do it. Could I, Lord? Lord?

I heard myself saying yes.

So, feeling like a rabbit in headlights, I found myself Warden of the College of Deacons, or the College of St Philip the Deacon as we are now called. My first task, new as I was in the diocese and without a clue as to how things worked or who did what – never mind the little business of never having met any of the deacons – was to plan and organise their yearly deacons' day. I discovered that the Revd Professor Paul Avis[13] lived in the diocese, who I knew was very supportive of the diaconate and had written some helpful theology. I asked him to be our speaker, and he was free on that date. It was one of many examples of God providing people and answers when I needed them.

Gradually I have grown into it, working with the deacons, listening to them, organising meetings they think would be helpful, and supporting them as much as I can. I discovered the job gave me a voice I could learn

13 Paul Avis was General Secretary of the Church of England's Council for Christian Unity from 1998 to 2011, Theological Consultant to the Anglican Communion Office, London, from 2011 to 2012, and Canon Theologian of Exeter Cathedral, 2008 to2013. At the University of Exeter he was Visiting Professor of Theology, 2009 to 2017, and is currently Honorary Research Fellow.

to use, developing an informal national network for deacons, advocating for the diaconate, challenging misconceptions and negative attitudes, creating resources for a ministry that is largely neglected in the Church of England. I work with a supportive steering group of diocesan officers who are engaged, listen and offer wisdom.

Other opportunities began to emerge to make a contribution not only in the diocese but also at a more national level. The Ministry Division of the Church of England had asked the diocese to draft selection criteria and learning outcomes for distinctive deacons, and my steering group looked hopefully at me. They saw me coming . . . but I took it on anyway.

This led to other work, and eventually back to the Diaconal Association of the Church of England, to which I had belonged for twenty-five years. It was in a parlous state, and I decided to attend their AGM in November 2016 when I knew a major decision would be made about its future. As expected, after duly consulting the shrinking membership, DACE closed.

I was very concerned. Although it had become unfit for purpose, it was the only organisation in the country specifically for distinctive deacons. What would happen to those deacons now? I knew that many of them were the only deacons in their dioceses and very isolated. They needed support and fellowship, and the knowledge that there were other members of the deacon tribe out there who would understand.

I had set up a blog three years previously in association with DACE. Through it I now asked if there were any deacons who would be interested in working with me on thinking through the future for the diaconate. Six deacons from different dioceses joined me; we met and talked, and began to function as an informal focus group. It was an encouraging step forward, but I was concerned that we were operating in a free-wheeling way. Although we each had the support of our own bishops, we were not accountable to anyone as a group. Then I heard of

the Rt Revd James Newcome, the Bishop of Carlisle, who had called a two-day conference on the diaconate in his diocese, and I asked him if he would consider taking us on. After consulting with Ministry Division and the Rt Revd Martin Seeley, head of the Ministry Council, he said yes.

I started a WhatsApp group for deacons which does exactly what I'd hoped: provides a forum for deacons all over the country, many isolated, who can ask for and offer prayer or advice or opinion and know that they are part of a supportive community. We set up a Facebook page. I learned to use Twitter. In company with deacons round the country, I produced the text on Distinctive Deacons for the Church of England national website.

Then one of the focus group went to Scandinavia to meet with deacons there, and came back with 'why don't we have a national conference?' Another rabbit-in-the-headlights feeling, so I ran the idea past Paul Avis who was immediately and immensely supportive and agreed to be our speaker. We started organising a conference for October 2018, but then were so oversubscribed we had to move to a bigger venue. We found ourselves warmly welcomed at the Queen's Foundation in Birmingham, where the principal, the Revd Dr David Hewlett, had deacons on his teaching staff, and had begun to plan for distinctive training for Anglican deacons alongside the courses currently running for both Methodist deacons and other ordinands.

It was the first time for many years that deacons had had the opportunity to meet together. They came from as far apart as the Isle of Man and the Isle of Wight, the Church of Scotland and the Church in Wales, York and Plymouth, and everything in between. We were led in worship by the Bishop of Birmingham, listened to Paul as he set out a theological underpinning of the diaconate, broke into discussion

groups to discuss a wide variety of diaconal ministries, and ended the day with practical ideas for raising the profile of our ministry in our dioceses. Most of all, deacons enjoyed just being with other deacons. Our tribe, speaking our language. More deacons were discovering that there's nothing quite like it.

Since the conference, a number of deacons who attended have been asked to assist their dioceses in developing diaconal ministry. Then seventeen deacons were ordained by the Archbishop of York, the Most Revd Dr John Sentamu, in January 2019, the fruit of a bold decision by him to offer diaconal discernment to those readers whose ministry was fundamentally diaconal, focused outside the gathered church. Here in the diocese of Exeter I continue to offer support to our deacons and organise an annual day of reflection as well as getting together to mark the feast day of our patron saint, St Philip the Deacon. In 2018 this, too, had to move to larger premises.

Dare I wonder: is the day finally coming when deacons will at last be able to take their rightful place, affirmed, respected and deployed as the third order of ordained ministry within the Church of England? What has to happen for that to come about?

1. First, there must be an end to the prejudice and discrimination against the diaconate and the diaconal vocation. Far too many enquirers are still getting told 'we don't do deacons'. How is this possible? The Church of England has always believed in the threefold ministry, but some dioceses behave as if there are only two: that of priest and bishop. Again, deacons of many years' experience are still meeting with hostility and even misogyny. Yet the Holy Spirit continues to call people to the diaconate. This must be affirmed, supported and encouraged to flourish.

2. Second, there must be clarity about the distinctiveness of the different ministries. It is helpful to think of these in terms of their primary focus, rather than only looking at where they overlap. For readers, this is the teaching of the faith to the gathered community, preaching and leading worship – a responsibility of vital value. There is no need for readers to see deacons as rivals. Our focus is outwards, on the margins and in the community. Our joint ministries should be practised side by side, in fellowship and mutual support, affirming each other. There is more than enough to do in God's vineyard. It seems to me there is a lack of joined-up thinking about the different ministries in the Church of England.

3. Third, we need a national policy. We're told that there's one already in place, but again, dioceses that are negative about deacons do not respect this. That's an unacceptable rejection of what the Holy Spirit is doing in a person. We also know that the fortunes of the diaconate fluctuate according to individual episcopal views. The call of God to be a deacon, and the necessary place of the diaconate in diocesan life, needs to be fully accepted and integrated, just as priesthood and lay ministry are.

4. Fourth, we need relevant vocational discernment and training. It is not helpful to be told that these are the same as for priests or readers. Certainly there is generic training which is relevant to everyone. But the mindset of the deacon is different from that of a priest or lay minister, just as the focus and trajectory of our ministry is distinct from theirs, although, of course, all ministries overlap to a certain extent. So training should take into account that the deacon will be ministering in the community, on the boundaries of church and neighbourhood, on the margins of society. Training incumbents are also asking for guidance.

Dedicated formation is needed for deacons to be adequately resourced, and surely some of this can be done in conjunction with other dioceses. The vision of Revd Dr David Hewlett, Principal of Queen's Foundation in Birmingham, for formational courses for diaconal ordinands and deacons could act as a national resource.

5. Fifth, the church also needs much more constructive thinking about posts for deacons. We have managed successfully to do this before, when women were not able to be priested. What happened to all those posts filled by women deacons – which unaccountably disappeared when women were priested? Deacon after deacon is finding that they reach the end of their curacy, only to discover that nobody has any idea what to do with them. This is surely irresponsible in a church which has affirmed their calling, trained and ordained them. Imagination is called for. When a post is to be advertised questions should be raised automatically as to whether or how this might be filled by a distinctive deacon. If the focus of the post is mainly in the community then this is a strong pointer to a diaconal ministry. In February 2019 the General Synod of the Church of England gave its overwhelming backing to a drive for a church to be set up on every significant social housing estate in the country as part of a programme of Renewal and Reform. This is the sort of situation where deacons would flourish. Is it impossible to consider a drive to recruit 'estates deacons'? There are many such places where teams could usefully include deacons, especially if there are retired or SSM priests locally. Such a combination is able to cover a wide and varied range of ministry which contributes to the Five Marks of Mission and the pressing need to share the love of Christ in a hurting world.

Will the church start to see us as we really are: God's agents of missional service in our communities, passionate about justice and poverty issues? That every deacon is pioneering, adapting, taking risks, building stepping stones, working collaboratively to build connections between God and those in need and those who do not yet know his love? As the Revd Canon Rosalind Brown has said, 'A deacon is a person on a mission, a messenger or ambassador – making connections between liturgy and pastoral need, building bridges between the life of the church and the community.

To do this well, deacons need to be free to focus on this ministry. Thus, while it is a vital truth that priestly ministry is founded on and embraces all of diaconal ministry, distinctive deacons are free to devote all their time and energy to diaconal ministry because they do not have the additional responsibilities entrusted to priests to lead the church in its worship and life. This gift to the church of ordained ministers, who can be out on mission all the time, is surely one to be encouraged and treasured.'

It may be a long way off still, but my prayer is that this hope, shimmering on the horizon at present, will be a real oasis at last and not yet another mirage. We know that unless our bishops take up the cause of the diaconate and develop a national policy, we will continue to scrape along the bottom indefinitely, struggling with the ups and downs of being ministers at the mercy of a largely indifferent church.

Meanwhile, I still have the clearest sense ever of being put into this position by God and led by him. He alone can open doors and give us the perseverance and courage to keep walking through and finding out what is on the other side. His plans are mysterious but purposeful. Whatever the future holds, I am immensely privileged that it was indeed part of his design that I should be one of his deacons.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Does my struggle to accept God's calling to me have any echoes in your own experience? If so, what did you find most helpful?

2. *He gave me the same answer I have been receiving for the twenty-eight years since I've been ordained.*
'Oh – you don't do anything different from anybody else. Everyone is trained for general ministry. That's how it works.'
'But how will I find out what it means to be a deacon?'
He was puzzled. He'd obviously never been asked this before.
(Chapter 5)

   People called to the diaconate train alongside those called to priesthood. Training providers in the Church of England struggle with the fact that because there are so few deacons, it is all but impossible to provide focused training for deacon ordinands. This means that some reach the end of their training with no clear idea of what their diaconate means in terms of identity or focus. How can training courses address this?

3. *When I completed four years of my curacy, I asked the archdeacon where I would next work. He was taken aback. He clearly had given it no thought.*
(Chapter 6)

   The Church of England recognises the call of people to the diaconate, affirms, trains and ordains them. But my experience is common. Once the deacon's curacy is over, there is often no idea how best to deploy him or her. What has to happen for this to change?

'You'll never amount to anything in the Church of England if you stay a deacon, Gill. You know that, I assume. You'll never make incumbent or anything else. You're going nowhere.'

I was also a deacon, not a priest, and felt I was being treated as second class, as if my contribution had no value.

(Chapter 6)

Many people who start as 'distinctive' deacons feel pressurised in various ways to become priests, because they feel there are so many obstacles in the way of remaining distinctive deacons. Where can they find encouragement, support and wise counsel in a church which frequently ignores and neglects them?

5. Chapters 8 and 9. Working as an 'undercover deacon' in Romania tested my sense of call and diaconal identity. It recurred in a different form during our time in Winson Green (Chapter 11). This is not unique to me and can happen when a deacon is under pressure, experiences a sense of confusion and loses focus. In this situation, how can they refresh their sense of vocation and diaconal purpose?

6. *He also said that it was nice that I was a deacon, but that I needed to be clear from the start that there would be no money to pay me.*

(Chapter 11)

Deacons are almost all non-stipendiary at present, but this is not always sustainable for those who have mortgages to pay and families to look after. Although the Church of England often claims to have no money to pay deacons, in fact money is found for other ministries such as Pioneer Ministers. Yet all deacons pioneer in different ways in their ministries. How might the Church of England address this issue?

7. How do you respond to priests who say 'we're all deacons really' and tell you stories of bishops who wear the diaconal dalmatic under their episcopal robes? Is this helpful or does it hinder the understanding of diaconal distinctiveness in the UK?

APPENDIX

THE DISTINCTIVE MINISTRY OF DEACONS

Deacons are boundary-crossers. We are always looking 'out' from the church, asking how the church and the Christian faith can cross the boundary with the gospel to those who do not yet know Christ, and to those who are in need. This generally means that people with a diaconal calling do not wish to spend most of their ministry inside the church building. The distinctive diaconate is for those who are strongly drawn to the go-between ministry, seeking out the lost sheep and bringing both the message of the gospel and the practical care that goes with it to the unchurched.

As those who cross boundaries, make connections and bring people together, deacons are well placed to move into challenging new contexts. We are risk-takers, but work collaboratively. We are able to build networks of relationships with community agencies and individuals, working with others to build healthy neighbourhoods.

For example, some deacons work with the homeless, with refugees, with addicts, with children excluded from school, with food banks, with sex workers and with Aids sufferers. We advocate for the poor and for justice, not only working with individuals and organisations but also speaking truth to power as the prophets of the church.

Others are 'embeds' in their community or at their workplace, starting new projects, supporting current ones, looking for fresh ways to connect with people, developing servant leadership at work. A number

of deacons are chaplains. One deacon advises a bishop on mission in the workplace. Another deacon is a chaplain to a racecourse. One acts as a lollipop lady, building relationships with her neighbours. Another creates community musicals, connecting her church with those outside it.

Yet other deacons are involved in reconciliation, or inter-faith work, or mission and evangelism, sometimes with pioneer ministers and fresh expressions of churches. *We are constantly encouraging the church to look outwards and share the gospel with our communities:* setting up bereavement visiting teams, ministering to those with dementia and their families, starting stay-and-play groups, developing creative worship, heading up the church's response to human need.

We all have one thing in common: *we prefer to be out and about in the community.* A deacon is a person on a mission, a messenger or ambassador – making connections between liturgy and pastoral need, building bridges between the life of the church and the community.

(Extract from 'What is a Distinctive Deacon? Answering some questions: https://deaconstories.wordpress.com/what-is-the-distinctive-diaconate-answering-some-questions/)

USEFUL LINKS

To find out more about deacons and diaconal ministry, here are a few useful links.

DEACON blog which is full of resources: https://deaconstories.wordpress.com

Church of England website page on vocations: scroll down to 'Distinctive Deacons': https://www.churchofengland.org/life-events/vocations/no-ordinary-#na

The Church of England's Ministry Division is currently renewing its approach to the discernment of vocations: https://deaconstories.wordpress.com/2019/06/24/shared-discernment-process-renewed-candidate-qualities-and-discernment-processes-2019/

Deacons' page on the website of the diocese of Exeter: https://exeter.anglican.org/ministry/vocations/diocesan-deacons/

Diocese of Salisbury: https://www.salisbury.anglican.org/ministry/ordained-ministry/distinctive-diaconate

Diocese of Southwark: https://southwark.anglican.org/downloads/vocations/Distinctive%20Diaconate%20Leaflet.pdf

Diocese of Sheffield: https://www.sheffield.anglican.org/UserFiles/File/Training/distinctive_deacon.pdf

Talk to your DDO to find out how the diaconate works in your diocese.

Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/DistinctivelyDeacon/

Twitter: @WardenGill

Get in touch: deacons@tutanota.com

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I am most grateful to the bishops, diocesan staff and local clergy in the diocese of Exeter and in other dioceses for their affirmation of the diaconate and their support and guidance. I also deeply value the wisdom and fellowship of my fellow deacons. I thank God for you all.

DEACON
by design

Gill Kimber

Honest, personal, determined, Gill recounts a lifetime of adventures with God to help us rediscover the ministry of the diaconate. Here is someone who knows and understands diaconal ministry from the inside and who offers an important challenge to a sometimes bewildered church.

The Rt Revd Nick McKinnel, Bishop of Plymouth

'Deacons enjoyed just being with other deacons' and they will thoroughly enjoy this telling testimony of a present desire to be recognised and affirmed. Ordinands should take note and learn from this story, as should those who continue to hurl the insult, 'when are they going to become proper priests?' Even more, this is for DDOs who are still baffled by diaconal enquirers who do not fit another ministry mould. The diaconate is such a rewarding ministry for the Kingdom of God when people with diaconal vocations are recognised and released for service as 'Deacons by Design'.

The Revd David Mann, Diocesan Director of Ordinands, Diocese of York

Behind every deacon there is a personal story of how the vocation has taken its particular shape. Gill Kimber's honest and vivid memoir illustrates the opportunities, joys and demands of diaconal life and ministry during the period when the Church of England has been gradually rediscovering this significant vocation.

The Revd Canon Rosalind Brown, Canon Emerita, Durham Cathedral: author of 'Being a Deacon Today'.

Cover photographs
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ISBN: 978-1-910719-79-4